Paint it RED!

Prologue

Emilia left the hospital alone, walking through the doors.
'I'm not going to let this bring me down' Emilia told herself, eyes wide and soul burning with determination.
She raised her head.
'Every day is a golden opportunity, to better yourself, and to better the life of those around you. If I've learned anything…its patience, it's never to be hateful, and it's the knowledge that things can always get better…'

PART 1/2

Chapter 1

Dear mother in hell. Today is the day, my first day, in this godforsaken school you insisted on me attending…. back when you were alive.
Sigh……
'Even in death you control my life' Emilia sighed. 'Such unfortunate circumstances for me.'
She reached the top of the concrete steps, seeing at last clearly now, the entrance of this new and unfamiliar school.
It looked nice, it looked really nice. The walls surrounding the property looked new, looked clean, the silver gates were open and welcoming. Upon the top of the wall itself there seemed to be shallow trays of soil, from which grew little bushes and flowers, some of which were hanging over the wall, but everything was maintained and organised.
Through the silver gates, there was a slightly curved road that led to the school a short distance away. The grounds either side of this road were large, the grass lush and green and cut-low. From where she stood, could be seen a tennis-court, a basket-ball court, and a larger building further away with a glass ceiling, that looked like it was perhaps an indoor swimming pool.
Emilia noticed then in the carpark before the front of the school, was a large and wide fountain. It was really big…. like…. you could probably fit …. twenty washing machines in this pool or something.
Emilia stared at it in surprise for a few moments, caught off-guard. There was a large statue in the centre of the pool, two dolphins leaping up playfully, water spraying from their mouths and raining down into the pool below.
The whole place was truly extraordinary, and Emilia was completely swept off her Swedish feet.

‘Ok, maybe this school isn’t so bad after all’ Emilia chuckled to herself awkwardly. ‘It’s gotta be better than my last one… anyway…. don’t let yourself be fooled Emilia!’ she beat her fist into her hand. ‘Appearances can be deceiving. Let’s remain cautious!’
‘Excuse me miss, are you alright?’
Emilia jumped out of her skin at that, attention shooting towards the voice.
The woman she saw was wearing a simple green jumpsuit and heavy boots. There was dirt on her knees and elbows, and her hair was held back from her face, tied neatly in a white bandana.
A gardener?
‘You were talking to yourself’ the woman said, ‘I was just wondering if you were alright.’
Emilia stared at the woman for a few seconds, catching herself. Her cheeks flushed red in embarrassment.
‘Oh gosh, I'm sorry’ Emilia fumbled over her words, hand going to her cheek, feeling herself getting suddenly hot. ‘I…talk to myself sometimes…. you know…when I'm nervous. I’m nervous now. I’m new….to this school I mean. This is my first day. Oh, sorry I'm rambling now…’
‘It’s ok’ the lady smiled welcomingly. ‘My name is Bootsie.’
‘Bootsie?’
‘Well…yes. My real name is actually Jessica, I have the same name as my stepsister and in the beginning, things got kinda confusing. My father began to call me Bootsie one day and it just stuck. I…always wear boots, even when I wear dresses, which isn’t often mind you. Oh, listen to me, I'm the one rambling on now.’
‘Oh no its ok!’ Emilia replied excitedly. ‘I um…my name is Emilia.’
Bootsie took in Emilia’s appearance. Her thick pale-brown hair with a big red clip on one side, and blue-grey eyes.
‘Lovely.’
Emilia’s attention began to slip away then, eyes glazing over.
My mother is…. was… a devout Christian. She believes in purity, and wanted to keep me away from men until I was ‘ready’…. whatever that means. She did not want me to give into my ‘lust’, and so she sends me to this all-girls school.
‘Ha! Jokes on you mother! As it turns out, I'm a raging lesbian!’
‘You’re talking to yourself again’ Bootsie smiled sweetly.
‘Oh my gosh I'm so sorry!’ Emilia went as red as a strawberry now.
‘So, you’re a lesbian. Well, I guess you’re in a good place then’ Bootsie chuckled.
‘No that’s not what I..... I mean uh….’
‘Relax. I was only teasing you.’
‘Sorry’ Emilia said. ‘I get uh…. I’m such an airhead. I really do live in the clouds.’
‘You mentioned your mother’ Bootsie said. ‘Did she want you to come to this school?’
Emilia hesitated.
‘She’s dead.’
Bootsie looked shocked then, eyes wide.
‘Oh I'm…I’m so sorry.’
‘It’s ok’ Emilia shrugged nonchalantly, looking towards her own shoulder and brushing off some dust from her collar. ‘It’s kinda a relief if I'm honest.’
‘I’m sorry?’
‘She didn’t like me very much’ Emilia admitted. ‘Truth be told I don’t know why she even had me.’

‘Oh I'm…sorry to hear that…’
‘Don’t be’ Emilia interrupted.
Emilia walked past the gardener then, pausing briefly and glancing back with a smile, eyes wide with excitement.
‘Every day is a golden opportunity to better yourself’ Emilia said, ‘and to better the life of those around you. If my mother ever taught me anything, it was patience. Things can always get better.’
And with that she turned and strode away, heading towards the entrance of the school, walking with a spring in her step.
Bootsie stared after her…
‘What a strange person….’

Emilia enjoyed the short walk; it was a pleasant day and the environment was serene. There were few others outside, and the grounds were mostly empty. The only figures she could see were far away.
Emilia’s eyes roamed all about her, seeing as much as she could.
This place is so cool.
Emilia paused, looking to the side.
‘That’s a pretty big car-park for the size of the school’ Emilia noted. ‘It’s like the kind of size I would expect for a super-market carpark. Hm.’
Emilia reached the entrance of the building, where the doors were left open and welcoming. She paused, glancing towards the plaque on the wall.

VISITORS THIS WAY

Emilia smiled in satisfaction, marching forwards, following the arrows upon the wall pointing her towards the reception.
She rounded a corner and came to a stop, suddenly faced with an obstacle.
A long flight of stairs.
‘Ugh’ Emilia rolled her eyes to the ceiling. ‘Great. Stairs. My one weakness.’
She frowned to herself, leaning forwards briefly and knocking on her shin with her knuckle.
Here goes nothing.
Emilia took a first step forwards, pausing, tilting her head up towards the top of the stairs.
From where she stood, she could see another sign, directing visitors towards the reception.
Emilia reached out, grasping the handrail firmly. She began to climb the stairs, doing so carefully and methodically.
Eventually she reached the top of the stairs, sighing in satisfaction. She was very pleased with herself.
‘That wasn’t so bad.’
Emilia continued to walk. She could see the reception now at the end of the corridor, a pleasant and spacious environment.

As she went, Emilia passed by a small group of girls. One of the girls, the one walking ahead of the others, turned.
‘Oh my god, what are you wearing?’
Emilia glanced around in response, eyes wide in surprise. It took her only a moment to gather her thoughts and think of a suitable response.
She stopped walking and turned fully around the face the girl that had spoken.
Emilia drew a slow and steady breath.
And formed her reply.
‘EEEEEEMAAAAAAHHHHHH GAAAAWWWWDDDDDDD. *What are yew wearing?*’
The girl blinked in surprised, obviously caught off guard by the response. The two girls that followed her, one either side, both looked shocked.
‘Oh look, a playboy bunny’ Emilia added as an afterthought, speaking normally now.
The stranger blinked again, composing herself.
‘You must be new’ she spoke curtly. ‘You stand out, and not just because the way you’re dressed.’
‘What’s wrong with the way I'm dressed?’ Emilia asked meekly.
The girl sneered at her, like Emilia had just asked the dumbest question.
‘You’re not in uniform. And why are you wearing trousers? It makes you look like a boy.’
‘I’m not in uniform?’ Emilia echoed. ‘Well dam, it’s almost as if I'm new to this school or something. Weird.’
‘You think you’re funny?’
‘Eh?’ Emilia shrugged.
The bunny’s eyes flashed. Emilia could tell that she was getting under the girl’s skin, though she honestly wasn’t trying that hard.
‘Why are you even in this school?’ the girl said to her, ‘you don’t belong here. You’re just a commoner.’
‘How can you tell?’
‘Anyone who comes from a decent background could tell’ the centre girl sneered. ‘Isn’t that right?’ she said to her companions that stood either side of her like columns.
They were already nodding at her words.
‘You can tell at a glance’ girl A said.
‘You look scruffy’ girl B added, ‘your shoes are scruffy, your clothes are scruffy…’
‘Not to mention the way you speak’ girl A chimed in.
‘My god’ Emilia said. ‘It’s like a hive-mind.’
‘Shut up’ the girl standing between the other two snapped angrily.
Emilia chuckled lightly.
‘I’ve met girls like you before’ she went on, ignoring the leader who had spoken, ‘the popular-pretty types. It’s all a front. You act confident and throw your weight around but in reality, you are *nothing*.’ She continued without pause, the looks on all the girl’s faces were all a mixture of anger, confusion, uncertainty, and hate. ‘You are not as great as you think you are. You are in this same shit-show of life as the rest of us. And if you’re the kind of person who has to put others down to feel good about yourself? Then that makes you only one thing.’
Emilia tilted her head.
‘Pathetic.’
A moment of hesitant silence followed. No one moved.
Emilia blinked then, lifting her head slightly.

‘I have to-’
The girl slapped her, abruptly halting Emilia’s words.
Emilia instantly tasted blood, having sharply bitten her tongue.
She whipped around back towards the girls, eyes burning with anger now. She was grabbed by one of them, who wrapped an arm around her neck, grabbing Emilia with her other hand by the hair.
Emilia snarled, teeth bared as the leading girl moved closer, hand lifting to hit her again.
Instinctively Emilia’s leg shot up, a perfect motion. Smooth and calculated.
She kicked the girl beneath the jaw, and the girl stumbled back, hand going to her mouth, eyes wide in shock and surprise.
She spat out a tooth.
Her friend stepped forwards then, not the one holding Emilia, but the other one. She began to sprout profanities at Emilia, charging towards her.
What she said went something like this:
‘You darn fool, I really wish you hadn’t hurt my friend. We will show you the error of your ways and make you regret defending yourself. You foolish female dog.’
The girl’s foot shot out, connecting with Emilia’s knee.
It was at that point, that Emilia’s leg fell off.
The momentum from the kick made the prosthetic leg sail through the air, sliding across the hallway floor and tumbling down the stairs.
The girls all screamed in fear and confusion.
‘What the fuck??!’
All their noise had finally attracted some outside attention.
The girl holding Emilia let go of her abruptly, causing Emilia to lose balance and drop to the floor.
By the time the receptionist arrived, the girls were long gone.
Emilia gazed up guiltily at the stern and frowning woman.
‘Emilia?’ the receptionist questioned. ‘The new student?’
‘Yes?’ Emilia replied, trying to sound as nonchalant and sweet as possible, sitting there with one leg folded outwards, and the other, at the bottom of the stairs.

Chapter 2

Emilia was in detention.
Quite an achievement, seeing as lessons had not even begun yet.
‘This has got to be some kind of record’ Emilia huffed, resting her chin on her palm, glaring at the wall opposite her. *Are you proud of me mother?*
Upon the table beside her, rested the prosthetic leg. It had been brought back to her, but Emilia had not fixed it back into place yet.
She stayed in this empty classroom alone for only a short time before a person arrived.
Emilia glanced up as she heard the door open, the figure that stepped in was perhaps a teacher, a young woman smartly dressed.

I guess this really is an all-girls school. I bet there aren't even any male teachers here at all. Awesome!
The young woman sat down opposite Emilia at the table, pulling out a small folder, inside which were some papers, though there were very few. Emilia glanced to the folder briefly, seeing her initials on the front.
Great.
'So, this is your first day here at this school' the woman said. 'I'm sorry I should really introduce myself first and not be rude. My name is Anna. I am the headmistress of this wonderful school.'
Shit.
'It's a pleasure to meet you' Emilia smiled sweetly, trying to look innocent, though doing an unconvincing job of it. 'My name is-'
'Emilia Beatrice Watts' the headmistress Anna interrupted, glancing down at one of the papers in the folder. 'Your mother is Natasha Watts; you are an only child and have no other family that is known to you. You were born in Sweden and spent the majority of your early life traveling the world. You spent many years living in Alabama before coming here.' She looked up at Emilia then. 'You're quite a way from home.'
'You could say that' Emilia shrugged.
'So, about what happened earlier' Anna began.
Shiiiiiiit.
'This will be going on your permanent record. Not a good start seeing as it's your first day.' Anna leant back in her seat, looking at Emilia from across the table with scrutiny. 'Would you like to tell me what happened?'
'Well, it all began with the part that none of this was my fault' Emilia said without pause.
Anna shook her head tiredly at this. She changed the subject again for a moment.
'It says your mother died recently' Anna went on, eye flitting back down to the papers before her. 'I am very sorry to hear that. Is there anyone else you can stay with? Friends?'
'No' Emilia shook her head. 'Any friends I do have right now are overseas. That's why I was sent here.'
'Who sent you here?'
'I don't know' Emilia shrugged. 'It was some official person or something. Apparently, mother planned to send me here anyway, so the plans were brought forward. Mother already had everything paid for I was told. She hadn't told me anything about it at the time though. She died unexpectedly from an overdose.'
'I'm very sorry to hear that. And your leg?'
'I was in a car accident' Emilia replied. 'My…. mother was driving.'
'Ok.'
Anna glanced down at the paper again.
'You like to kickbox and do gymnastics.'
'Yes' Emilia smiled enthusiastically. 'Sadly, I um…. can't really do kickboxing anymore.' She lightly tapped the prosthetic leg that lay on the table between them. 'I used to be really good…. before my leg was mangled beyond saving.'
'Are you any good at gymnastics?'
'I think so, only a little though. Kickboxing was more my thing.'
'Well, I think we should help you focus on your hobbies, so your behaviour doesn't come out in negative ways. We have many different sports and hobbies including stables for horse-riding.

I don't want to hear again that you've hurt another student. You knocked out her tooth by the way.'
'That wasn't my fault, I was only defending myself! And about the horse-riding' Emilia added in a quieter tone, 'I'm not really keen on horses. They're too unpredictable for me.'
'Do you have any other interests?' Anna asked her.
'I love history, and reading…'
'Then maybe you're worth keeping after all.'
'Hm?'
'We take violence and rule breaking very seriously in this school. This is not only my school, but my home, and I want to maintain its excellent reputation.'
'Understandable.'
Anna closed the thin folder with its papers inside, rising to her feet then.
Wait, that's it? We're done here?
'I will give you a second chance' Anna told her, 'because….'
Yes?
'…. I think you have potential to be a good student.'
Oh, that's great.
'Perhaps today was just a bad day' Anna finished.
'Yes' Emilia agreed, 'perhaps it was. Thank you. And…I'm sorry.'
Sorry I got caught.
'Just please try to behave in a more civilized manner in the future. Violence is never the answer.'
I disagree. And so would the Roman General Vegetius, who once said, 'if you want peace, prepare for war'. And I will fight tooth and nail.
'…you can defend yourself if the need calls for it, but under no circumstances are you allowed to hit another student.'
Awesome!
'Or kick' Anna clarified.
Are you kidding me?
'Do you understand Emilia?'
'Absolutely loud and clear!'
'Now, do you have any questions you would like to ask me?' Anna asked.
'Why is the carpark so big?'
'What?' the headmistress seemed thrown off by this odd question Emilia had asked so suddenly.
'Why is the carpark so big?' Emilia repeated. 'A school this size wouldn't need a carpark that large. It's like…twice the size I would have thought it should be.'
The headmistress raised an eyebrow, still feeling perplexed at the unusual question.
'It's pretty empty right now' Emilia muttered as an afterthought. 'The carpark I mean. That's a lot of wasted space.'
'It fills at the end of the year during the party' Anna explained.
'Party?'
I love parties!
'We have an end of year party every year' Anna said.
'Is it at the end of the year?'
Emilia asked this before she could stop herself.

‘There is a boy’s school a few miles from here’ Anna continued, ignoring Emilia’s previous question. ‘This school and that school are both very old. We have a ball at the end of the year, so we don’t stay strangers to our neighbours.’
‘Oh’ Emilia said. ‘That’s cool.’
Ugh.
‘Any other questions?’ Anna asked.
‘Nope.’
‘Hm’ Anna frowned, gazing down at Emilia who remained seated. ‘Alright’ she said at last, turning to leave.
At that moment there came a knock at the door. Perfect timing.
‘Come in’ Anna said.
Emilia glanced past the headmistress as the door opened, seeing the figure that entered was another student, wearing the dress-uniform.
‘Gloria, thank you for coming.’
‘It’s my pleasure’ the girl whose name was apparently Gloria replied sweetly, closing the door behind her and turning to face Emilia with interest.
‘This is Emilia Watts’ Anna introduced. ‘She is the new student.’
‘It’s a pleasure to meet you’ Gloria smiled to Emilia. ‘My name is Gloria Hayden.’
Emilia took in the student’s appearance.
She had pretty bright-blue eyes, and white-blonde hair set in an old-fashioned style. And an aura of joy and excitement.
She’s cute.
‘Hello, it’s nice to meet you’ Emilia beamed back.
‘Gloria will be your roommate’ Anna continued, ‘she will help you adjust to this school and help you settle in.’
‘Oh great’ Emilia said.
‘My previous roommate left some time ago’ Gloria told her. ‘I’ve been by myself for quite a while, it’s been kinda lonely. I was very happy when I heard I was finally getting a new roommate. I thought I would have to spend the rest of this year by myself’ she laughed awkwardly.
Oh, I love her laugh…
‘Well, you don’t have to be alone anymore’ Emilia said. ‘I hope we become good friends.’
‘I hope so too.’
‘I’m sure you two will get along fine’ Anna said now, her tone dismissive as she moved towards the door. ‘I have things to do, if there is anything you need from me’ she said to Gloria, ‘don’t hesitate to let me know.’
‘Of course,’ Gloria grinned.
Anna marched out of the room, allowing the door to swing gently shut behind her, leaving Gloria and Emilia alone together.
‘So, I hear you got yourself in trouble’ Gloria mumbled, covering her mouth and glancing away then.
‘Oh no, you know about that?’
‘Word gets around fast’ Gloria replied, straightening up then and continuing to smile.
Her eyes were bright with energy, and she had the most beautiful smile.
‘Maybe this is wrong of me to say…’ Gloria began.
Emilia instantly perked up in interest at that.

'…but um…...oh….' Gloria shook her head. 'Maybe I shouldn't say.'
'No' Emilia tensed, suddenly gripped with anticipation. 'Please tell me! I hate it when people do that.'
Gloria held her hands together before her, straightening her shoulders.
'Don't tell anyone I said this but…. Sarah probably deserved whatever you did to her.'
'Sarah?'
'The girl you attacked.'
Emilia blinked. 'I didn't attack her! It was self-defence.'
'Did you really fight her?' Gloria asked, leaning forwards eagerly with her hands behind her back now. 'You must be really brave.'
'No' Emilia replied indignantly. 'The word fight implies both parties involving themselves in a confrontation or struggle of some kind. This girl you say is called '*Sarah'*…. just got her ass handed to her. It was like pushing a kitten over.' Emilia dusted her hands off. '*Easy*.'
'Wow.' Gloria's eyes shimmered in awe, clutching her hands over her heart. 'You're really amazing to be able to do something like that.'
'Nah. I've just had a good teacher, and the discipline.'
'Teacher?'
'My kickboxing teacher' Emilia clarified. 'Not to mention I'm very flexible.'
'Kick…?' Gloria blinked in confusion. 'What…did you do to Sarah?'
'I kicked out her tooth' Emilia grinned smugly, showing not the slightest bit of remorse.
She shouldn't have messed with me.
'Oh….' Gloria breathed.
'Yeah…. I'm kinda good at what I do…' Emilia's expression soured then. 'At least I used to be….'
Emilia patted the prosthetic leg which lay on the table.
'I had to give up my passion because uh…. Well, it's a bit hard to kickbox when you only have one leg. And a false one just isn't the same.'
'Oh, I'm so sorry.'
'Why?'
'Hm?'
'Why are you sorry?' Emilia asked.
A long silence passed between them.
Gloria shifted uncomfortably. 'I… d-don't know' she chuckled awkwardly. 'I guess…. it's expected for someone to say something like that.'
'You don't need to be sad or feel bad. There's nothing to feel bad about, I am *thriving*.'
Emilia grinned widely then, from ear to ear. She shivered excitedly.
'It's so much fun surprising people. I've stabbed my fake leg before, and you should see people's faces! It's hilarious!'
'Oh gosh…. you don't go around stabbing things very often I hope.'
'Of course not,' Emilia crossed her arms indignantly. 'I'm actually not a violent person. I don't start a fight, but by God I am happy to end it.'
'Wow, you're quite a character.'
'You think so?' Emilia asked dryly.
'So, would you like to come with me then? I can show you around this wonderful school.'
'Cool. I'd love to. That would be awesome.'

Emilia stood up a little too fast then, forgetting that she had yet to fix her prosthetic leg back in place.
She swiftly lost balance and fell over, painfully landing into the chairs beside her.
'Oh my gosh are you ok!?' Gloria started forwards.
'Ow ow ow…' Emilia pushed herself up gingerly, shoving the chairs away from her, doing so angrily as if they were personally responsible. 'This is uh…. embarrassing…' Emilia's cheeks flushed a little as she reached for her prosthetic leg, which rested innocently upon the table above her. 'I uh…sometimes forget I still only have one leg.'
Emilia grabbed the plastic leg.
She rolled onto her back, lifting her knee up and awkwardly fixing the prosthetic leg in place.
Emilia leapt up enthusiastically then, acting as if nothing had happened.
'Great!' Emilia beamed, hands upon her hips. 'Shall we go?'
Gloria began to chuckle then, covering her mouth and hunching her shoulders.
Oh my god her laugh is so cute!
'What's so funny' Emilia huffed.
'You're just a very stranger person.'
'I am not!'
'I don't think I've met anyone quite like you' Gloria giggled.
'Is that a good thing or…?' Emilia raised an eyebrow.
Gloria straightened up, composing herself.
'Come on, let's go and I'll show you around. Are you ok to walk?'
'Yeah, I'm ok to walk. My leg only fell off when I kicked Sarah.'
Gloria giggled again.
Aaahhhh! Her laugh is so adorable!
Emilia stared at Gloria blankly, hiding her thoughts and feelings.
'I'm sorry I'm sorry' Gloria gasped. 'It's just good to hear that someone finally stood up to Sarah. She can be such a bully sometimes.'
'Oh good' Emilia said perking up. 'I'm glad what I did made *someone* happy at least. I thought for a minute I was going to be expelled. I don't think Anna was very pleased with me.'
'Our headmistress is a very kind and sweet, caring person. If you every have any problems, you can speak to her. You can trust her to keep whatever you tell her a secret if you ask her to. She's had a difficult life in the past, and has helped a lot of people, like Terry, so she has a different perspective. She's very understanding.'
'Ahhh cool' Emilia replied, distracted now as she gazed out the window.
That's a pretty yellow butterfly. They must love the flowers that grow here.
'Alright then' Gloria sighed, wiping her eye. 'Let's go.'

Chapter 3

Emilia and Gloria walked together out of the room, Gloria a step ahead of Emilia.
As they went, Emilia glanced to the side, askance to Gloria, before looking ahead again.

‘So, what do you think of this school?’ Gloria asked.
‘Oh, um…well maybe it’s a little too soon to tell, but it seems really nice so far.’
‘It’s just a shame you had a bad experience so soon with…well….’ Gloria shook her head. ‘We won’t talk about *her*; I still find it very funny what you did though.’
Gloria lifted her hand to her mouth, trying to hide her smile.
Emilia watched her closely as she did this.
No, don’t hide it, your smile is beautiful.
‘So, I guess we’ll be room-mates then’ Emilia said.
‘Yeah, I think it’s cool.’
Oh my god she’s so cute!
‘So, tell me a little about yourself’ Gloria said.
Eeek!
‘Well…’ Emilia thought, speaking casually. ‘What would you like to know?’
Oh my god is she interested in me?!
‘Where were you originally from? Were you born here?’
‘I….no, I was actually born in Sweden. I lived in America for a while before coming here.’
‘Oh wow’ Gloria glanced around; eyes bright. ‘You’ve been all over the world.’
‘Well…not over the *entire* world’ Emilia chuckled awkwardly, scratching the back of her head. ‘It would be cool to travel to a few other places someday.’
They reached the end of the corridor, coming to the stairs. Gloria slowed a little so they could walk side by side now down it.
‘Can you speak any Swedish?’ Gloria asked.
‘Varför jag faktiskt kan.’
‘Oh wow, that’s so cool.’
Oh my god she thinks I'm cool!
‘It’s ok I guess’ Emilia mumbled.
Gloria smiled sweetly.
Oh my god I love her smile so much I hope I don’t get so distracted I fall down these stairs aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh she’s so amazing!!!!!!
‘I wish I could speak German’ Gloria said. ‘I’ve always wanted to learn a language and I’ve always thought German was pretty cool.’
‘Yeah, it is I guess.’
‘So where were you before you came here? I mean…what school did you go to before this?’
Oh my god, I think she’s genuinely interested in me!
‘Oh, my last school was a total opposite of this’ Emilia said dramatically, talking with her hands. ‘I was teased a lot, things turned physical…. for a short time…. until I kicked some asses.’
Gloria giggled.
‘Then after that’ Emilia continued, ‘they just started to ignore me or tease me from a distance. I was self-conscious about my height and my leg and stuff but…whatever…’
‘You’re not still self-conscious about your height, are you?’ Gloria asked her, sounding worried. ‘You’re only a little taller than me.’
They had reached the bottom of the stairs.
‘Nah. I don’t give a crud anymore.’

‘Haha.’ Gloria chuckled. ‘And what about your leg? You’re not self-conscious about that are you?’
Emilia smiled. ‘No. I’ve grown mentally, I think. I am happy with who I am, I am happy with the way I am. If anyone has the guts to say anything bad to me…. well…. they’ll just have to deal with a foot to the face.’
Emilia sighed then, a little sadly now.
‘I hate it when people exploit my weakness’ she spoke in a mumble. ‘I….um…. the kids in my other school would steal my leg and run away with it…hide it places…’
‘That’s terrible…’
‘It’s ok’ Emilia said animatedly, straightening up with her hands upon her hips. ‘I was always great at playing hide and seek. But um…sometimes it was hard to get my leg back…even though I could see it, I couldn’t always reach. Some of the kids liked to hide my leg in trees, or high up on the roof…. you know…places I couldn’t easily reach. The number of times I fell out of trees or other high places…I’m surprised I didn’t break my back. It’s really hard to climb with one leg. But I did it!’
‘I’m sorry people treated you that way’ Gloria said to her, sounding genuinely sad.
‘It’s ok. It gave me some time out of class. Those lessons were always so boring. The teachers were always so boring. I hope the lessons in this school will be different.’
‘I’m sure they will be’ Gloria nodded.
They came to the doors now, stepping outside.
‘Aaahh’ Emilia sighed, lifting her hand to shield her eyes from the sudden brightness. ‘It’s lovely out here…’
Gloria appeared beside her, tilting her head up towards the sun also.
‘Where shall we go first?’ she asked.
‘I don’t mind’ Emilia replied, ‘anywhere really.’
‘This school is pretty big’ Gloria said, looking about them. ‘I guess it doesn’t matter where we go.’
‘Cool.’
‘How about we go to the library first?’
‘Also cool.’
Gloria beamed at Emilia.
‘You like the library then?’ Emilia asked her.
‘Oh yes’ Gloria replied enthusiastically. ‘It’s my favourite place.’
I get to see her favourite place. Emilia smiled to herself. *Cooool*.
‘It’s this way’ Gloria said, turning and walking away.
Emilia turned towards her as Gloria went, lingering for a moment before making after her.
They walked side by side, doing so at a gentle pace.
Emilia was happy, she glanced towards Gloria briefly. Gloria was smiling to herself.
Emilia watched her lips for a time, before facing ahead again.
A smile tweaked at the edges of her own lips then, and Emilia dipped her head slightly to try to hide this.
Things are going well she thought to herself. *I am happy…*

Chapter 4

The library was a beautiful place, vast, reaching back into crevasses unseen.
‘Woah, this place is huge.’
‘I love it here’ Gloria was smiling, standing with her hands behind her back as she watched Emilia begin to wander forwards. ‘You can really get lost in a place like this, time seems to just slip away.’
Emilia glanced towards Gloria briefly, before looking away again.
She smiles a lot…
Emilia continued walking. Her footsteps echoed slightly on the smooth wooden floor. Emilia’s attention drifted to the side, towards one of the tall bookshelves.
She moved closer to it, past the ladder fixed upon the tracks on the floor.
Emilia extended her arm outwards, running her middle finger across the spines of the books, eventually stopping at one.
She touched the top of the spine, tilting the book forwards, pulling it gently out and off the shelf.
She placed the book open in her hand, flicking through the pages.
‘I love poems’ she spoke distracted to herself, flicking the pages slower now, finally stopping at the place she wanted.
Emilia tilted her head downwards, eyes lowered to the page.
She began to read out loud.

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore—
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
As of someone gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.
“’Tis some visitor,” I muttered, “tapping at my chamber door—
Only this and nothing more.”

Gloria had come up behind her then, leaning forwards to see the page.
‘You have a wonderful reading voice.’
Emilia blushed slightly at that, snapping the book shut and placing it carefully back on the shelf.
‘I’m s-sorry’ she said, suddenly becoming flustered. ‘I kinda lost myself.’
This seemed to make Gloria happy and excited.
‘That’s so cool! I feel the exact same way.’
That made her happy! Oh my god wow!

‘Well…’ Emilia sighed, turning away. ‘If you have a garden and a library…then you have everything you need.’
‘Hm?’
‘Oh! Sorry, gosh I’m not usually this awkward. I was quoting someone.’
‘That’s ok’ Gloria answered sweetly. ‘Who were you quoting.’
Emilia licked her lips, straightening up and taking a slow breath, trying to steady her beating heart.
She felt suddenly nervous again.
‘Marcus Tullius Cicero.’
‘Who?’ Gloria blinked.
‘He….is considered to be one of the greatest Roman orators.’
‘What’s an orator?’
‘It’s uh…a public speaker, you know…a really good one. One who is considered to be eloquent and skilled.’
‘Oh, I see.’
Emilia grinned awkwardly as she continued to speak. ‘Cicero was also a philosopher, a politician, a lawyer, a political theorist….’ She trailed off.
‘He sounds like a very interesting character.’
‘Oh yes’ Emilia replied happily, placing her hands together before her. ‘I love history, and historical figures. I find them fascinating.’
A silence passed between them, a silence in which Gloria simply smiled to Emilia pleasantly.
‘Lets…. let’s go back outside’ Emilia suggested. ‘I want to see more of the garden.’

Chapter 5

The grounds of the school were beautiful and pristine. Gloria and Emilia walked for the most part in silence. But it was a comfortable silence, and as they went Emilia, glanced all about her, eyes roving over the fields and flowers and buildings around them.
‘I can’t believe what a polar opposite this place is to my old school’ Emilia mumbled.
‘I’m sorry, what was that? I didn’t hear you.’
‘It’s nothing.’
They continuing to walk in a random direction.
‘So where are the others?’ Emilia asked. ‘I mean…the other students.’
‘They’re in their classes now.’
‘How come you’re not in class.’
‘Because I’m showing you around, silly’ Gloria beamed at her.
‘Oh no, are you saying you were pulled out of class for me?’
‘It ok’ Gloria waved at her. ‘I don’t mind at all. Truth be told, it was kinda a boring lesson, and it’s a nice day to be out anyway. And besides….’
Gloria brushed a strand of hair behind her ear.
‘…I was excited about meeting my new roommate.’

Oh my god I love her so much!!!!
'Oh! You know I totally forgot that we were room-mates now. Will we be going to the dormitories soon?' Emilia asked.
'Soon, but not yet.' Gloria stopped, turning on the spot to face Emilia. 'I don't want to go inside just yet.'
As she was speaking, Emilia's attention began to drift over her shoulder, slowly focusing on something behind her.
'Who's that?'
'Hm?' Gloria looked around. 'Oh, that's Maddy.'
'Maddy? Why isn't *she* in class?'
Gloria looked back at Emilia with a smile. 'Well, why don't we go over and ask her?'
Emilia felt a sudden twinge of nervousness at that.
Why am I nervous? It's just a girl. I can do this.
'Sure' Emilia replied. 'Let's go see her. I want to try to make new friends.'
'I hope you're not shy at all' Gloria said.
'Wait, are you teasing me?'
'Of course not!' Gloria hesitated. 'Well…maybe a little. Sorry. But I promise Maddy is lovely. She's a little shy herself so…'
'Why is she by herself?'
'She spends a lot of her time alone. I don't know if it's just by choice or…she's just different.'
'Oh.'
'You'll see. Come on, let's go speak to her.'
Gloria walked away.
Emilia hung back for a few seconds, lingering for a time, before following after Gloria.
They approached Maddy. She was kneeling before a flower bed, leaning forwards, tending to the flowers.
When she noticed the approaching shadows, she leant back, sitting on her heels. Maddy glanced around.
'Hey Maddy.'
'Hey Gloria. Who is that?'
Gloria touched Emilia's arm lightly as she introduced her.
'This is Emilia. She's the new student.'
'Oh.' Maddy answered flatly. She put her tools down, rising to her feet and dusting herself off.
'It's nice to meet you, my name is Madison. But I prefer if people just call me Maddy.'
'Ok then' Emilia replied, 'Maddy.'
Maddy nodded.
'So, um….' Emilia smiled awkwardly, holding her hands together tightly to stop them from shaking. Her body all over was trembling slightly with nerves and excitement both. This was all so new and strange to her. 'I'm sorry' Emilia laughed. 'I'm nervous.'
'That's ok' Maddy said. 'I understand.'
'Oh cool.'
'So, what do you think of this school so far?' Maddy asked in a flat voice.
'It's really nice' Emilia nodded. 'It's really a big school, the gardens are huge.'
'Yeah, they are.'
An awkward silence passed between the small group, until Gloria spoke up.
Oh, thank God.

‘Emilia was wondering why you weren’t in class like the rest of the students’ Gloria said.
‘Oh’ Maddy said. ‘That’s because I'm a genius.’
‘I’m sorry?’ Emilia said, wondering if she had heard that right.
Maddy averted her eyes, swaying on the spot.
Emilia looked her up and down briefly. Her body language seemed strained.
I guess she’s not really comfortable with strangers. Maybe she likes to be alone.
‘I don’t know how best to explain it’ Maddy said, ‘my mind is like a computer. I excel academically. My mind is like a sponge.’
‘That must be nice.’
‘I suppose’ Maddy answered, ‘of a sort. But it gets kinda lonely. I find it hard to uh…’ Maddy hummed to herself then, swaying on the spot again.
‘Maddy can be a little socially awkward at times’ Gloria stepped in.
It seemed as if she was going to say more, but then Maddy interrupted.
‘On nice days, I like to do some gardening. But only if it’s not too hot or too cold. On days I don’t like it outside, I go inside. I like to study and learn new things. Sometimes I like to dance.’
‘Oh’ Emilia replied.
She sounds kinda robotic.
‘That’s nice for you’ Emilia said.
‘You should go now’ Maddy told them then. ‘I’m busy.’
Then without another word she turned away. Kneeling back where she had been before and leaning forwards over the flowerbed.
She continued with whatever she had been doing. It wasn’t clear to Emilia exactly what that was, but it seemed as if she was moving the flowers around. Slightly to the left, slightly to the right or further away or closer.
Emilia’s attention lingered on this strange girl for a few seconds, before her attention flickered up, back towards Gloria, who was giving her a peculiar expression.
Gloria shrugged apologetically.
‘Come on’ she said to Emilia. ‘Let’s go.’
They walked away together, as they did, Emilia glanced back towards Maddy briefly.
Once the two girls were a distance away, Gloria spoke again.
‘Sorry’ she said, ‘maybe I should have explained it a little better. Maddy’s um…. different.’
‘No, I think I understand’ Emilia said, looking away. ‘I… hmm.’
‘She really is a genius you know’ Gloria went on. ‘She’s just difficult to interact with sometimes. She doesn’t understand social cues and things like that. But she is a nice girl, she means well but sometimes she says things that she um, well she doesn’t mean to upset anyone, but sometimes the things that she says and how she says it can be hurtful to other people. She can be quite blunt and abrasive without meaning to be.’
‘I understand’ Emilia said. ‘She seems nice.’
‘I’m glad you think so.’
They continued walking.
‘There’s still so much to see’ Gloria told her. ‘Where would you like to go next?’
‘What about that building over there?’ Emilia asked pointing.
‘Oh! That’s the gymnasium. Let’s check it out. It’ll probably take a long time to see the whole school.’
‘Sure.’
As they headed slowly towards this large building, Emilia paused briefly.

‘Look at these flowers’ she sighed, leaning forwards to smell them. ‘I love lilies, they’re so pretty.’
Oh mother, I remember how you used to love these flowers. They smell so good. Too bad you’re dead now.
‘Sorry’ Emilia fumbled, straightening up again as she saw Gloria a short distance away waiting for her. ‘I’m coming.’
‘It’s ok’ Gloria smiled. ‘I love the flowers too.’
Emilia hurried up to her, reaching her side once more.
They continued walking together, heading towards the gymnasium.

The double doors of the entrance to the gymnasium were tall and made of glass, allowing those outside to see in.
As they approached, Emilia was able to get a preview of the building’s interior, before they actually entered. Just beyond the entrance doors was a large room, filled with lockers. A large empty space in the centre and a desk by the back wall, behind this desk it was vacant.
‘Thank you’ Emilia said, as Gloria opened the door for her.
They entered the large building.
‘There are three large halls in this building’ Gloria told her, ‘…and a fourth smaller one. That one is used mostly as just a storage room.’
‘Right.’
On either side of the entrance-locker room, was an open doorway, through one of these doors could be heard sounds coming from beyond.
‘There must be a lesson going on right now’ Gloria said excitedly, leaning forwards eagerly. ‘Let’s go take a look.’
Emilia followed her new roommate towards one of the open doors, heading towards the sounds.
A few seconds later, after moving through a short stretch of hallway, with doors leading off to several bathrooms and more locker rooms, and smaller storage rooms, they reached one of the halls.
Emilia blinked in awe as she stepped out of the hallway, coming to stand at the edge of the gymnastics hall. It was a vast hall, with a high ceiling, and was currently a buzz of activity.
Emilia briefly looked over at the figures, they were all girls.
Oh yeah, I forgot for a second this was an all-girls school….
The gymnastics hall had everything a gymnast could possibly need, there were beams and bars and horses and boxes and bucks and springboards and trampolines, as well as large empty areas of floor and mats about the place.
‘This place is incredible.’
‘Well, this is the best school’ Gloria said, ‘the funding I hear is very good, and the students that graduate all excel in whichever field they chose.’ Gloria averted her eyes momentarily, seemingly doing so shyly. ‘Anna cares for this school very much.’
‘Anna?’
‘The headmistress.’
‘Oh yeah.’
The one I got in trouble with.
‘I guess I’m very lucky to have the opportunity to come to this school’ Emilia mumbled.
‘Well…I’m glad you’re here anyway.’
Emilia’s attention flickered towards Gloria suddenly.

Is she gay?
'I think we'll be very good friends' Gloria said.
'I hope so…I mean…I'm sure we will' Emilia replied.
Gloria smiled.
'I mean…' Emilia went on, 'I won't kick you in the face and break your tooth.'
'Please don't' Gloria giggled behind her hand. 'I won't be mean to you, I'm sure I won't do anything to make you want to kick me in the face.'
Awwwwww? She's so cute!
'Anyway' Gloria continued, as Emilia turned her face away, scratching at her cheek nervously, having gone a little red. 'I don't think we'll have time to see the whole school at this rate.'
'That's ok.'
'Mealtime will be soon' Gloria told her.
Oh yummy.
'I am getting a little hungry.' Emilia said.
Oh god I hope I won't have to sit on my own and be the new and weird girl that everyone is so painfully aware of.
'Um…. Gloria?'
'Yes?'
'Sorry, this is kinda embarrassing…' Emilia murmured.
'You don't have to feel embarrassed or uncomfortable around me' Gloria said.
Emilia groaned to herself, hunching her shoulders and hugging herself.
'How do we eat?'
'I'm sorry?'
'I mean….' Emilia fumbled.
I'm such a stupid….
'I don't want to eat on my own' Emilia blurted out. 'How does the school eat, I mean…. can we eat together? I don't want to be the lonely one again.'
'Awwww, of course Emilia' Gloria replied sympathetically, appearing a little relieved.
Did she just 'awwww' me?
'Of course we can eat together. I'm happy to spend the rest of this day with you. Lessons will be over soon so I have free time' Gloria said. 'And as for food, the canteen cooks food three times a day at the same times every day. If you're hungry outside those times, there are vending machines. You can buy anything, sandwiches, snacks, fruit and so on. There are drinks too. Put it this way, you'll never go hungry…or thirsty. Oh! And if you ever have any problems, you know…emotionally, or if you're sick, if you have any issues of that sort you can go to see one of our nurses. They are all lovely. Oh wait, I haven't shown you the nurse's station yet.'
'I won't be taking you away from your friends, will I?' Emilia mumbled, head dipped, looking at Gloria only reluctantly now.
'Of course not. They'll understand. We all knew you were coming.'
'We?'
'The whole school.'
What, everyone?
'It's not often we get a new student so late. Word kinda gets around here you know?'
Oh god…. this could be used to my disadvantage……or advantage if I play it right…if I have to…dammit.

‘It’s a closed place this, but that’s not a bad thing’ Gloria went on, placing her hands together. ‘We have everything we need right here so people tend to stay, most of the girls live far away. Almost everyone stays here over the holidays and such. Only a few go home at the end of the day too. What I mean…gosh I'm not very good at explaining. Everyone kinda knows everyone here. If something happens…or rumours. You know… it kinda gets around.’
Oooohhh it’s like that.
‘No, I think I get it’ Emilia replied.
‘There is a small housing development near here’ Gloria explained. ‘A small number of students go home at the end of each day, but most of them live here until we’ve completed our education. Like us, we’ll be living here.’
‘Cool.’
They looked away again, towards the figures in the hall. Every piece of equipment was being used, and it was a busy scene.
‘Anyway’ Gloria spoke up, ‘um… the canteen will be open very soon. We can go together.’
‘That would be great.’
‘Then afterwards we can wander the school some more. Oh! I haven’t shown you the pool yet. We have a swimming stadium, that’s what we call it anyway…’
‘Is that the building I saw from the entrance?’
‘Yes. It’s a really big pool. I really love to swim but I'm so busy with my studies that I don’t get the chance to, you know? Not as often as I would like anyway.’
‘Yeah, I totally get that’ Emilia sighed. ‘I haven’t been swimming since…my gosh…. I can’t even remember. It’s been years. Gosh….’ Emilia said again. ‘I guess I must have been in Greece the last time I went swimming. The beaches are lovely there you know?’
‘No, I'm afraid I’ve never been to Greece.’
‘Yeah, but you must have been to the beach before.’
‘Of course,’ Gloria smiled. ‘Oh….’ Her eyes became distant then, ‘it’s been a while but I remember going to the beach with family. And I remember building sand castles with my little brother.’
‘Aww that’s cute’ Emilia said. ‘I’m an only child. I don’t know what it’s like to have a brother or sister. I kinda feel like I’ve missed out.’
‘It can be nice’ Gloria sighed. ‘I mean…I love my little brother very much, but I never get any peace, when I’m at home he constantly pesters me. I could be asleep and he’ll come and jump on my bed to wake me up wanting to play.’
‘Yeah, that does sound annoying.’
Gloria smiled at that.
They looked away again, back towards the figures dotted about the hall.
One of the girls in the hall caught Emilia’s attention. She stood out from the others because of her green dyed hair.
Almost as if she sensed Emilia’s gaze, the girl turned around.
Her expression broke into a grin, and she stopped what she was doing, making her way over towards them. Emilia watched mutely as the girl approached.
‘Hey Gloria’ the girl beamed. ‘How are you?’
‘I’m doing great’ Gloria replied. ‘Yourself?’
‘I’m great too.’
What’s with her hair? She looks like a cabbage.
‘Aren’t you missing your ballet class?’ Gloria asked her.

‘Oh, the teacher’s sick today’ the girl said. ‘We had a spare period so I asked if I can join the gymnast group today, a few of the other girls in my class did the same. That’s why it’s a little more crowded in here than usual. I didn’t want to just sit around and do nothing. That’ll drive me crazy. So, is this the new girl?’
Ugh. I hate being called that.
A whistle sounded then, and everyone in the hall stopped what they were doing.
‘Yes’ Gloria replied, glancing towards Emilia. ‘This is Emilia, and Emilia, this is Shannon.’
Emilia took in her appearance briefly. Shannon had big brown eyes, jaw-length green hair, and black clips in her hair on either side that formed a cross.
‘It’s a pleasure to meet you’ Shannon hastened, ‘I have to go now, sorry.’
She hurried off then without another word, rushing to meet back up with the other girls in her group as the teacher gathered them around to talk.
Emilia watched her go.
Hm.
‘Classes would all be finishing about now’ Gloria said to Emilia. ‘The canteen will be opening super-soon. Shall we go?’
Fuck yeah!
‘Yes, I would love to’ Emilia gleamed, smiling sweetly back at her new friend.
They walked out of the gymnasium, stepping back into the open grounds again.
Emilia could see now, the grounds were busy, when before they were deserted, now she could see groups slowly milling out of the buildings here and there.
‘I hope you don’t mind queuing’ Gloria said to her.
‘Not at all’ Emilia replied. ‘As long as I get to eat, I don’t mind waiting.’
‘That’s good.’
‘Do they serve dessert?’ Emilia asked.
‘Of course.’
Emilia smiled at that. ‘That’s good’ she said.
Hearing this, Gloria glanced towards Emilia, smiling back to her in turn.
‘I guess Maddy’s gone back inside’ she said absentmindedly. ‘She doesn’t like crowds all that much.’
Emilia’s attention lingered on Gloria for a little longer, before drifting away again.
God, I hope they have cake.

The meal was divine. The canteen was huge, with plenty of good food and even better, lots of tasty desserts.
Emilia got her cake.
After this, Gloria led Emilia to another building, one of the more modest sized ones. They entered one of these modest buildings clustered at the edge of the school grounds.
It was nice to be here after the noise of the canteen, which had been heavy in the air with chatter.
‘These are the dormitories’ Gloria said.
I hope she’s not getting bored of me…
‘They are organised in numbers one to five. This one is ours’ she indicated, ‘building five.’
It looked exactly the same as the other four buildings.
‘Do you ever forget which one is yours?’

‘Only once. Oh… no maybe I shouldn’t say…’
‘What do you mean?’ Emilia asked. ‘Please tell me. I sense a funny story.’
Gloria frowned, glancing about before speaking again.
‘Keep this a secret but, there was a party some months ago. A few of us got drunk. Nothing happened but…that sort of behaviour is frowned upon.’
Aww? That’s no fun.
‘I think it goes without saying’ Gloria went on, ‘but alcohol is not allowed in this school. Luckily, I wasn’t caught, but a few of the other girls did get in trouble. I wasn’t that drunk but…I did have trouble finding my dormitory, not only the right building but uh…well….’ she looked uncomfortable then, perhaps an unpleasant memory.
Something embarrassing she did? I want to know what it is. But dam I know I can’t just ask…or can I?
Gloria continued before Emilia had any more time to think on this.
‘That was ages ago and we’ve been good ever since. One of my friends just learned that they became and auntie, and we wanted to celebrate. Her older sister back at home had a beautiful baby boy called Ryan.’
‘Cool. So, are there any other rules this school has that I should know about?’ Emilia asked.
‘Sure’ Gloria nodded. ‘Most of it is just common sense. Like….no fighting?’ she shrugged.
‘Was that a dig at me?’ Emilia said in mock annoyance, leaning on a hip and folding her arms.
‘No no, I would never…. ok well maybe slightly…. only a little bit though.’
Emilia chuckled lightly at that.
She liked this girl, and was quickly feeling comfortable around her.
In turn, Emilia’s relaxed manner seemed to make Gloria happy, seemed to put her at ease too.
‘Come on’ Gloria giggled, spinning once playfully before trotting off with a spring in her step.
‘Let’s get back to the dorms. I want to show you your new room.’

Chapter 6

The dormitories were fine. Emilia preferred the rest of the school. To her, the place looked a little like a hotel, or something similar.
The corridors were long, and the doors to the rooms were all on one side.
Yeah, this looks kinda like a hotel.
Emilia saw that some of the doors had been personalised with stickers, pictures and plaques with names on. One of the doors simply had the words GET OUT painted in black.
‘What’s that all about?’ Emilia asked.
‘That’s Anastasia’s room. She’s a bit of a princess’ Gloria explained. ‘She’s only here half the time, her family are rich or whatever and…well, she keeps to herself. No one really knows much about her. I doubt you’ll ever see her.’
‘How come she gets her own room?’ Emilia asked, pausing at the door and lingering there for a moment.

‘Honestly, I’m not really sure. It maybe because she’s caused so much trouble for the headmistress, poor Anna.’
‘What did she do?’ Emilia asked.
‘Oh, nothing really’ Gloria waved her off. ‘Just a few pranks here and there. I never saw any of them myself but…well…I heard stories.’
‘Oohhh.’ Emilia swirled her head in a big ark, taking in all she could see around her. ‘So why are the doors all…uh…?’
‘Personalised?’ Gloria offered.
‘Yes.’
Gloria’s eyes sparkled, shooting a glance back at her, before turning ahead again.
‘Anna lets us give our own personal touch to the doors of our rooms; she lets us express our creativity. Plus, it helps to tell the doors apart. At the end of the year the doors are all painted white again, ready for the new students.’
‘That’s so cool.’
One of the doors had a large painting of a mermaid, surrounded by an array of multicoloured fish with bright scales, covering every corner of the door in intricate and vivid patterns. Another was painted a single colour, a few were left pure white.
Gloria paused in front of one of these doors.
‘This is your room?’
‘Our room’ Gloria corrected.
‘You haven’t painted your door yet?’
‘Eh’ Gloria shrugged. ‘I hadn’t planned on it. I was thinking of leaving it white.’ She paused. ‘You can paint it if you want though.’
‘Nah. Can’t be bothered.’ She noticed the door beside theirs.
Woooow…
‘Pretty, isn’t it?’ Gloria noted, seeing Emilia’s intense interest.
Emilia moved closer to get a better look at that door.
It was a painting of a mermaid trapped in a large glass bottle, her tail spilling out from the narrow neck. Outside the bottle were twisting and gnarled branches, blooming with flowers. Brightly coloured yellow-birds were shown flitting about the scene.
‘This has been here for years.’
‘Is that allowed?’ Emilia asked, ‘I thought the doors were painted white at the end of every year.’
‘Technically no, it’s not allowed. But this is an exception,’ Gloria replied, ‘That room hasn’t been used for years, not since she went missing.’
‘Missing?’
‘No one knows what happened to her. She just vanished one day. Most think she ran away, but no one knows why.’
Gloria stared at the mural.
I never knew her’ Gloria went on. ‘I don’t know who she was, she’s since graduated. I’ve been told by one of the teachers that she attended this school a long time ago. There’s more of her art about the school. It’s fun for new students to find.’
‘She graduated? I thought she went missing’ Emilia said.
‘She did’ Gloria explained. ‘She spent many years as a teacher before that happened. She loved this school, which is why it was so odd that she left so suddenly. This was her room, she shared it with her sister.’ Gloria went on. ‘She lived at this school, here in this room for ages, and

rarely left unless she was teaching. I've been told the room is full of her paintings, paints and easels and all kinds of arty-stuff. All left just as they were the day she and her sister vanished.' Gloria paused. 'I bet its all dusty in there now.'
'Maybe her sister knows what happened to her' Emilia offered.
'No, her sister was never found either.' Gloria paused. 'Now that I come to think of it' Gloria scratched her chin, 'maybe they weren't sisters at all, I can't actually remember if they were even related…did I accidentally make that up?' she asked the ceiling. 'Maybe they were lovers. Or were they enemies?'
'Lovers hu? Maybe they ran away together.'
'It doesn't matter. You won't hear much about her, all this happened a very long time ago apparently, and no-one goes in that room anyway.' Gloria shrugged. 'I bet the truth is a lot more mundane. Maybe she never even existed at all, and the paintings left behind are something else entirely.'
'Oooohh' Emilia said.
Occam's razor.
'When you hear hooves, think horses, not zebras' she mumbled.
'What?'
'It's nothing' Emilia hastened. 'Just thinking out loud. I bet it was an ARG.'
'What?'
'Don't worry' Emilia waved the matter away.
Emilia leaned back towards their own door, a blank door. The only thing upon it, were a few numbers painted onto the wood at its centre to identify it.
'I wonder how many layers of paint this door has?' Emilia murmured.
'What?'
'Nothing' Emilia gleamed. 'Shall we go in?'
Gloria stepped forwards, turning the handle and holding the door open for Emilia.
Emilia stepped into the room, looking around.
'I didn't expect it to be so spacious' she said.
Gloria stepped into the room herself and closed the door behind her.
'Well, this is an excellent school. They want to make sure the students are happy and well cared for.'
For a price Emilia thought to herself. *How much did this place cost you mother?*
And then her mood suddenly soured.
Where were you hiding all of that wealth when I was hungry all those times? You still had money to get blazed.
'Stupid' Emilia muttered quietly under her breath.
'I'm sorry what was that? I didn't hear you.'
'I said *splendid!*' Emilia declared excitedly, throwing her arms out. 'This room is just beautiful.'
'I'm glad you like it.'
'Which bed is mine?' Emilia asked, stepping further into the room, drifting towards the centre. She tilted her head up then, eyes growing wide.
'Oh no way, there's even a little chandelier in here. Wicked.'
'This one's mine' Gloria said, moving over towards the bed on the left and falling forwards on top of the covers.
'I guess this one's mine then' Emilia said, moving over to the bed on the right. 'What's this?'

Emilia reached down to pick up the plastic packet that sat in the middle of the sheets, bringing it closer to examine it.
'Oh! That must be your uniform' Gloria said, springing and skipping over towards her.
'You mean I get to wear one like yours?' Emilia asked, looking Gloria up and down briefly.
'Yes, you do' Gloria winked.
Emilia's eyes travelled down Gloria's uniform again.
The uniform of the school was a dress, the same one the three girls had been wearing when they so kindly introduced themselves, and Emilia introduced herself in turn by kicking out a tooth.
Ahhh…blissful memories….
'Wait a second…' Emilia voiced suddenly. 'I um…' she looked down at herself, then to the uniform she was still holding in the packet.
'What's wrong?' Gloria asked.
My leg…
'Nothing at all' Emilia waved her away. 'Don't worry yourself. I was just thinking how pretty you look in your uniform.'
'Oh um, thank you.'
Oh god maybe I shouldn't have said that last part. What if she thinks I'm flirting with her? Wait, AM I flirting with her? Cripes I don't even know myself.
Emilia sighed wearily.
Since when was I such and air-head?
'I mean the uniform is really pretty' Emilia said.
'Well, I think so too.'
The uniform was a one-piece dress, pale grey in colour with a white collar and cuffs. The skirt was knee-length and the tie that came with the uniform was dark green.
'That's the standard uniform for students. The teachers have their own uniform. You might have seen it; the headmistress wears the same too. I like the little red neck-string.'
'Oh yeah, I did see that.'
'Some of the students that come here for further education, science and medical classes, wear the same uniform as the teachers, so it can be hard to tell them apart.'
'Higher education, eh?'
'Yeah, but the bar is really high' Gloria said. 'Only very few make the mark to be accepted in those classes. The best of the best, you know?' She paused. 'What would you do if you could, I mean…what higher education would you like to study?'
'Radiology.'
'Oh wow. You didn't even pause. Don't you need to be good at maths for that?'
'Maybe.' Emilia replied. 'What about you?'
'I want to be a chemist, just like my daddy.'
Emilia looked away from Gloria, and back to the plastic sheet she held, inside the uniform, *her* uniform, was new and folded neatly.
'Mmmm' Emilia whispered to herself. 'Factory-sealed. I bet it smells lovely.'
'They should already have your sizes recorded' Gloria said to her. 'Unless you didn't fill out that paperwork.'
'No, I did.'
'Great! Then they should fit just fine. Its nice material and it will stretch a bit so…. anyway, if it doesn't fit you can always request another. They have tights too for when it's cold.'

Emilia looked back down at the bed, seeing a second smaller plastic packet there, inside was black material.
Tights.
'What about shoes?'
'Right there' Gloria pointed.
Emilia glanced towards the end of the bed, where there waited a new pair of shoes.
Not really my style but….
'Do you mind if I change real quick?' Emilia mumbled in a distant voice. 'I want to get out of these clothes.'
'Oh! Yes of course.'
Gloria turned her back on Emilia, facing the wall.
Emilia hesitated; she looked down at her uniform briefly. She opened the packet, pulling the dress out and placing it out on the bed.
She stared down at it for a few moments, before reaching for her shirt, beginning to unbutton herself slowly.
Gloria continued to stare at the wall, standing with her hands held together before her.
Emilia slipped the dress over her head, grabbing the tie from the bed and throwing it over the back of her neck, fixing it in place.
She turned to face Gloria, who was still facing the wall.
'What do you think?' Emilia asked.
'Can I turn around?'
'Yeah.'
Gloria spun round cheerily, cheeks rosy and eyes bright.
'Oh wow.' She clasped her hands together before her. 'You look really nice.'
'Do you really think so?' Emilia said, dipping her head and examining herself. 'I mean, I've never worn anything like this before. You don't think I look silly, do you?'
'No no of course not. Why? You don't think *I* look silly wearing this uniform, do you?'
'Oh gosh no, that's not what I mean' Emilia fumbled.
'It's ok' Gloria laughed. 'I'm just playing with you.'
'Oh, thank goodness.'
'You know' Gloria began, 'I think…'
The silence stretched on.
'What?' Emilia finally said. 'Come on, don't leave me hanging like that. What do you think? Honestly.'
'Maybe I shouldn't say anything' Gloria began, 'but…I feel like you put on a front. You're not as confident as you pretend to be.'
A flicker of annoyance coursed through Emilia's body.
Dammit, am I really that easy to read? No, I don't think I am, maybe it's just her…
'I don't know what you mean' Emilia replied sweetly, hugging herself.
Gloria giggled lightly at that, hunching her shoulders.
Cuuuuuuuuuuuute!
'Are you going to wear your tights?' Gloria asked.
'Oh' Emilia said, 'I guess…'
She reached for them, taking them out of the packet.
'It might be a little awkward with your leg' Gloria spoke absentmindedly.
Emilia froze suddenly, a memory striking her abruptly then.

Pain and misery, being unable to run or even lift herself as the other students surrounded her, one of them waving her fake leg around as he mocked her.
Emilia straightened up, dropping the tights back on her bed.
'Hm?' Gloria blinked curiously.
'I won't wear it.'
'What?'
'I won't wear it' Emilia spoke more firmly this time. 'I want to show the world my so-called *faults*. I believe you should embrace them, do so and they can never be used to hurt you.'
She turned around to face Gloria, a frown upon her lips.
Gloria looked surprised, hesitant for a moment, before a smile spread across her face, grinning widely at Emilia.
'Lovely words' she said.
Emilia simply gave her a nod in return.
'You're really an interesting person' Gloria said to Emilia. 'I'm glad you're my new roommate.'

Chapter 7

Weeks passed, and it had taken sometime for Emilia to settle into this strange new place, but after a while she had begun to get the hang of it. Or at least she thought she did.
She had fought with the girl called Sarah a few more times. Sarah seemed to have developed a pure hatred for Emilia since being kicked in the mouth. She certainly had it in for Emilia, seemingly having sworn vengeance against her.
Emilia never took this seriously of course, and in all honestly barely thought of her. Simply continuing with her day-to-day life.
Over the days and weeks that had passed since she first entered the school, Emilia had made many friends, and she seemed to have become well-liked by many of the people around her, including the teachers. Emilia had thought that she was doing well all in all. Despite being punished a few times by some of the teachers for various minor reasons. Missing homework, turning up late, feeding Sarah a mayonnaise-filled donut, buttering the floor in front of Sarah's dorm-room, playing a prank on Sarah involving coke and mentos, putting hot-sauce in Sarah's food, dumping flour on Sarah from high places multiple times, putting food-dye in Sarah's toothpaste and making her teeth green, putting clingfilm across doors, fake spiders in her bed.
It was a good thing that Emilia was friends with Sarah's roommate.
All in all, Emilia was rather pleased with everything.
Sarah on the other hand, not so much.
Sarah's roommate was the girl was green hair called Shannon. Emilia still thought of her as a cabbage, though she would never admit it out loud. Not at this point anyway. It was a good thing Shannon was such a good sport when it came to pranking Sarah. She would never take part in the pranks herself, but if she knew about them, she would keep silent. And for that, Emilia was grateful.

Shannon and Sarah weren't exactly close friends. They got along well enough, though didn't really click. But their friendship had grown over time due to the amount of time they spent together in their classes, despite their differences. And of course, the time they spent together in their dorms.
Emilia was grateful for her own roommate. She and Gloria got along very well, and had become good friends.

Some days later

Emilia was lying on her side on the grass now, beneath the shade of a large apple tree. She rested with her arm folded beneath her head, sipping from a carton of orange juice as she dozed off.
She opened her eye as she heard movement, seeing a figure coming towards her.
Emilia smiled upon seeing her friend.
'Hey Tulip' Emilia grinned, sitting up and tucking her legs beneath her.
Tulip slowed to a stop as she reached her.
'What are you doing out here by yourself?' she asked Emilia.
'Me?'
'Well yeah, who else am I talking to?' Tulip smiled, raising her eyebrows expectantly.
'Oh. Nothing. Not really. Just resting. It's nice to get some alone time every once in a while. I was just enjoying the peace and sipping a bit of juice.'
Emilia lifted the little carton and began slurping loudly through the straw.
'You know I hate it when you do that' Tulip scowled.
'Do what?'
'Ugh.' Tulip placed a hand upon her hip, rolling her eyes upwards to the leafy canopy above.
'Anyway' she went on, 'I wanted to ask if you were ready to go swimming.'
'It is time?' Emilia asked excitedly.
'It sure is' Tulip replied, unable to hide her own enthusiasm. 'How are you feeling?'
'I'm feeling much better. Don't worry about me.'
'Of course I'm going to worry about you, what's not to worry about?'
'I have a bad habit of um…' Emilia laughed sheepishly. 'Sometimes I forget to eat, and it always catches up to me, you know? Sometimes I don't realise how hungry I am.'
'Exactly' Tulip scolded. 'But as long as you're ok…I don't want to make you worse. Can't have you drowning on me.'
'I would never!' Emilia cried indignantly. 'I feel fine, honestly. Plus, I'm too young to die.'
'Hmmmmm.' Tulip narrowed her eyes, her straight violet hair falling about her shoulders as she tilted her head slightly.
'Are you sure you're going to be ok and not faint again?'
'Positively sure' Emilia gleamed back.
Tulip stared down at Emilia, still holding the frown upon her face.
'Ok' Tulip finally said.
She reached into the bag she carried at her side, rummaging around in it.
'I got you something' Tulip mumbled, finding what she was looking for and holding it out for Emilia to take.
'Chocolate! Yey!'

Emilia swiped the bar from Tulip's hand, tearing the wrapper open and scoffing the chocolate down.
'That's not very lady-like' Tulip told her sternly.
'And who said I'm lady-like?' Emilia finished ramming the last of the chocolate bar into her mouth, before pulling the straw out of the orange juice carton and tipping it upside down, squeezing the last of the juice directly into her open mouth.
Emilia let out a heavy sigh, dropping the carton on the ground beside her and letting out a small hiccup.
'You can be so unsavoury sometimes' Tulip said to her.
'I don't know what you mean' Emilia grinned cheekily.
'Come on then' Tulip sighed. 'Now that you've got some sugar in you, are you ready to go swimming?'
'Heck yeah I am!'
Emilia leapt up, picking up the empty carton and the straw, putting them away in her bag.
'Lead the way' Emilia said, bouncing on the spot like some sort of excited spaniel puppy.
'What do you mean?' Tulip gave her a peculiar look. 'You know where the pool is right?'
'I sure do.'
'Then why…?'
Tulip fell quickly silent then, as Emilia jumped to her side and weaving her arm through Tulips.
'Let's walk together' Emilia beamed.
'Ok.'

Dear mother in hell…. today I went swimming with my friend……

They walked for a short time before Emilia let go of her, bending down and rubbing at her knee.
'Are you alright?'
'Yeah yeah I'm fine' Emilia mumbled dismissively. 'Dammit. Maybe my mother was right. She always told me I'd never stop growing.'
'She did?'
'Yeah' Emilia sighed, straightening up again and adjusting her leg, shifting her knee from side to side. 'My mother always called me 'a stork' because of my height. Dam woman. She knew how to get me. She knew I was self-conscious about my height. And then I lost my leg. She honestly made fun of me for that too.'
'That's awful.'
'Not really' Emilia said nonchalantly. 'Now that I think of it, it was kinda funny.'
Tulip sighed then, shaking her head. 'You can be very odd sometimes.'
'Do you really think so?'
'How's your leg feel now?' Tulip asked, avoiding the question.
'It'll be alright' Emilia replied. 'I am looking forwards to taking it off though. It would be nice to swim without it.'
'That's good.'
They continued walking.
Along the way Emilia spotted a girl she knew, though had rarely spoken to. She slowed to a stop, staring at the girl.

She had rose-red dyed hair falling freely about her shoulders, thick black-rimmed glasses and a strong build. She was reading a book silently amongst a small group of friends a short distance away. She stood out to Emilia, and not just because of her hair.
Emilia had seen her for the first time a few days after she had first arrived at the school. She instantly felt her heart jump to her throat, her palms begin to sweat, unable to look away, scared her fixation would be noticed.
She had yet to speak to this girl. She did not have the courage. But Emilia had learned from others, that her name was Naomi. Every time Naomi was close or Emilia noticed her from any distance away, she became suddenly shy and awkward.
Tulip was not the first person to have noticed this, but those that had said very little about it. When a few of her friends had mentioned this to Emilia, she would always shrug them off.
'Are you coming?' Tulip asked Emilia, pausing and glancing back. She noticed the focus of Emilia's attention then. 'Oh' she said. 'Naomi.'
'It's nothing' Emilia huffed, marching forwards with her shoulders hunched, face beginning to redden.
Emilia hated being caught off-guard like that.
She stormed on ahead, calling out to Tulip behind her.
'Are you coming or what?'
'Sure' Tulip sighed.
She hurried after Emilia, and together they made their way on towards the pool.

The building was empty as far as they could make out. They dressed quickly, slipping on their bathing suits. There were no specific rules when it came to swimwear, as long as it was 'decent', the girls could wear whatever they wanted, no matter the shape or colour.
Emilia wore a simple dark one-piece, a basic horizontal blue line running across the front, the rest was a single colour. Tulip wore a cute little bikini, splashed with colours of lime green and bright pink. She looked great in it, and wore it like a queen.
Tulip waited for Emilia as she made her way gingerly towards her. Emilia was always a little nervous when she was walking on certain surfaces without shoes. She had fallen many times in the past because of surfaces that were 'too smooth' for her prosthetic leg.
Emilia reached out and grasped Tulip's forearm as she offered it to her. Tulip helped Emilia walk the rest of the way, supporting her so as to keep her safe from the merciless force of gravity.
They walked down the corridor carefully, coming to the pool at last.
Tulip led Emilia to the water's edge, Emilia continuing to hold onto Tulips arm as she carefully positioned herself at the edge of the pool.
'Thank you' Emilia smiled, letting go.
Tulip nodded at that, moving around her to her other side and crouching down, feeling the water.
'So warm' Tulip sighed contentedly, sitting down and dipping her toes in. 'Ahhh….'
Tulip slipped quickly into the water as Emilia fiddled with her knee, taking off the prosthetic leg and placing it carefully at the side of the pool.
'That's so much better' Emilia sighed with relief, slipping into the water and leaning back against the edge of the pool. 'It's so great to take that thing off every once in a while. It rubs me so bad some days…'

Emilia glanced about, noticing Tulip was out of sight. She waited a few seconds, and then Tulip re-emerged a few feet away, leaping out of the water dramatically.
'You look like a mermaid' Emilia grinned.
'I feel like a mermaid. I wish I were a mermaid. I would be a much better and faster swimmer.'
'Wouldn't you get bored of that?' Emilia asked.
'What do you mean?'
'You'd be stuck in the water forever. Imagine trying to get to your lessons with a great tail instead of legs.'
'Yeah, I guess that would be rather inconvenient' Tulip replied, shrinking back into the water. She moved further away from the pool's edge, heading towards the deeper end, her movements smooth and graceful like an otter. Or a mermaid.
'Are you coming?'
Emilia hesitated only briefly. She had rarely spoken of this before, but she had a mild fear of the water. Nothing severe but, she was always cautious around it, especially out in the open sea. An indoor swimming pool was far more comfortable for her.
I still can't shake this fear of drowning. Oh mother…
Emilia moved away from the edge of the pool, easing herself through the water.
She rolled onto her back, staring up at the ceiling as she waved her hands gently around her, hearing Tulip splashing nearby.
Emilia turned on her side in the water, swimming in a side-stroke, before pausing and glancing around, noticing after a time that once again, it was suddenly silent.
Tulip broke the surface of the water, gasping and huffing.
'That was pushing it.'
'What are you doing?'
'Seeing how long I can hold my breath' Tulip breathed heavily. 'I'm getting slowly better. I can hold my breath a lot longer than I used to.'
'That's cool.'
I'd try the same if I wasn't so afraid.
'Come on' Tulip said. 'Let's have a race.'
'You're on.'
They swam to one side of the pool, positioning themselves.
'Dam I wish we had a whistle' Tulip mused.
'On the count of three?'
'One?'
'Two.'
They pushed away from the edge, beginning to swim.
They raced.
Unbeknown to them, the small door in the corner of the hall opened, and several figures entered.
Minutes passed, and Emilia lost her rhythm in the water, gasping at the wrong time and breathing in water.
Tulip didn't notice at first, instead went on to win the race.
'I win!' She looked around. 'Emilia are you ok?'
She swam back over to her friend.
By this time, Emilia had stopped coughing.

‘I’m sorry’ Emilia gasped, gathering herself at last and sweeping her wet hair back from her face. ‘I forgot for a second you can’t breathe underwater. Well done Tulip’ Emilia congratulated. ‘You’re such a great swimmer.’
‘Oh, come on Emilia’ Tulip replied teasingly. ‘You could be better if you worked a little harder.’
‘What’s that supposed to mean?!’ Emilia replied indignantly. ‘You’ve got an unfair advantage! You’ve got more paddles!’
‘Paddles?’ Tulip cocked her head in confusion.
‘You’ve got four, I’ve only got three.’
‘Hu?’
Emilia leaned back in the water, lifting her amputated leg.
‘Oh, I see’ Tulip said flatly.
‘It’s hard to paddle with only one foot.’
‘That’s just an excuse.’
‘I don’t know what you mean.’
Tulip slapped the water playfully, sending splashes over Emilia’s head.
‘Hey!’
Tulip only laughed at this, before slipping back beneath the surface.
Emilia watched her as she swam close to the floor of the pool, slowly turning gracefully in the water before rising to the surface again.
Emilia felt a twinge of nervousness.
Calm down. It’s ok. Don’t let yourself panic.
Emilia let out a steady breath.
‘Hey Emilia! Come and catch me if you can!’
Tulip dived forwards into the water, back below the surface and away.
Emilia was just about to make her way after her, before she glanced around purely by chance. Perhaps it was something in her subconscious that alerted her.
She noticed then that something was wrong. Something was missing, not where she had left it.
My leg!
She swam over to the pool’s edge, eyes darting around.
Where the hell is it? I know I left it here. Someone must have taken it.
And then a figure appeared.
Oh, great I should have known….
It was Sarah, slowly walking towards her, holding her leg.
‘You don’t need that’ Emilia smiled sweetly. ‘You already have two legs, And besides, it wouldn’t fit you anyway. Unless you’re into that sort of thing. I bet you’re really stretchy.’
Sarah sneered at her. She was mad.
‘You’re always so funny aren’t you.’ Sarah said. ‘Always so clever…’
Without warning she swung the prosthetic leg as hard as she could, hitting Emilia in the side of the head.
Emilia cried out in pain and surprise. On the other end of the pool, Tulip who had only recently surfaced again, watched in shock and disbelief.
Emilia had no time to gather herself, before Sarah grabbed her by the hair, forcing her head under the water.
Emilia began to panic.

Before she went under the surface, she saw Sarah's two friends behind her, laughing as she struggled to free herself…

Chapter 8

Nothing happened in the end. Tulip chased the girls away, screaming in anger before rushing back to Emilia, who still remained in the pool.
'I'm fine I'm fine' Emilia hastened, as Tulip knelt at the edge of the pool, leaning over her, grasping her by the arms, as if scared Emilia might sink beneath the surface again.
'I can't believe she did that to you!'
'Don't worry about it' Emilia said firmly.
The tone of her voice made it clear that she did not want to pursue the matter.
'It's ok' Emilia said, speaking in a gentler tone now. 'I'll get her back, don't you worry.'
Tulip made a noise of displeasure at that.
'What, with another prank? You need to stop fighting with her' Tulip told Emilia. 'That's the only reason she acts this way towards you, no one else fights with her like you do.'
'Oh, does that make me special?' Emilia gleamed.
'This isn't funny Emilia' Tulip said sternly.
'Oh come on.'
'She tried to kill you!'
'You're overreacting' Emilia rolled her eyes. 'I'm not gonna die. You think I'd let a pipsqueak like that end my life?'
'She tried to drown you!'
'So?'
Tulip looked livid.
'Why are you so nonchalant about this?' Tulip snapped.
'I've faced people way worse than her.'
'Emilia….'
'And besides, if I do die….'
Oh heck, I might meet my mother again.
'You know what?' Emilia relented, 'maybe you're right. Can you just do me a massive favour please? Can you get my leg back and then we can just forget about all of this?'
Tulip let out a heavy sigh, frowning down at her, shaking her head.
'Oh Emilia, I wish you would be more careful.'
Emilia said nothing as Tulip rose to her feet, turning and making her way away.
'I'll be as quick as I can' Tulip said to her.
'Thanks. I'll just wait here.'
Emilia watched her go, before pulling herself up and out of the pool, turning and sitting on the edge, hearing the water slosh off her as she did. She kicked her foot playfully in the water, making waves and humming a theme to herself.

'…what if everyone could see, that just by holding hands, like the dango fa-mi-ly, you will find love. Now the little dango town, is slowly blossoming, into the, bright world I dream of. Just beyond the starry sky, the rabbit's on the moon, wave and smile down upon, the world below. Roll up all the little things, that make you sad and find, all the things, that make you ha-ppy.'
She waited patiently.
It wasn't too long before Tulip returned to her, back in her normal clothes now. She was carrying Emilia's prosthetic leg in her hand.
Upon seeing it, Emilia felt elated.
'Sweet!'
Tulip came to the edge of the pool, handing the leg to Emilia.
'Thank you so much' Emilia said to her.
Tulip didn't reply, instead continued to stare at Emilia, expression serious.
'What?'
'Nothing' Tulip sighed. 'I just….' She shook her head with a smile then, this time her demeanour more relaxed. 'It's nothing. I'm just glad you're ok.'
Emilia quickly attached the prosthetic leg.
'There' Emilia beamed. 'All better. Can you help me up?'
Tulip offered Emilia her arm, who took it gratefully. Tulip helped her to her feet.
'Whoops!' Emilia wobbled slightly.
'Easy there' Tulip said. 'Are you going to be alright?'
'Definitely. Let's go back to the locker-room, I wanna change.'

Tulip waited as Emilia dressed, putting her shoes back on. She felt much better with her shoes back on, sturdier, less likely to fall over.
As she closed the locker, Tulip spoke up, glancing to her watch.
'It's getting kinda late, I should be getting back to my room. I need to study, and there's other work to do.'
'I'm sorry to keep you.'
'No, it's ok.'
'You can go ahead if you like' Emilia said to her.
'Um.'
'What?'
Tulip laughed awkwardly. 'I uh…don't want to leave you alone.'
'What do you mean?'
Tulip frowned to herself, reluctant to answer.
'You're not worrying about those girls are you?' Emilia said. 'They're nothing. You know I can handle them. They only came today because well…' she shrugged with a smile, 'I was unprepared. It's harder to fight when you're in water and missing a leg. They have no chance against me on land. They only came when they did because I was vulnerable. I would have done the same.'
'You would have tried to drown someone?' Tulip asked incredulous.
'No no, that's not what I meant!' Emilia hastened in a panicked tone. 'What I meant was…to increase your chances of besting your opponent, you strike when the odds are most in your favour. Imagine a predator and its prey in the wild.'
'I wish you'd take this more seriously' Tulip lamented. 'I wish you weren't so nonchalant.'
'I'm not going to cry about it' Emilia replied simply.

‘I’m not saying you should’ Tulip said, as Emilia lifted her bag, walking over to her. ‘I’m just thinking that maybe you should talk to the headmistress or something.’
‘And admit defeat? No way. I’m not showing weakness.’
‘This isn’t a game Emilia’ Tulip answered seriously.
‘Sure it is.’
‘One of these days you could get seriously hurt.’
‘Oh stop’ Emilia chuckled, patting Tulip on the top of her head playfully. ‘It’s sweet that you care so much for me, but there’s no need to worry.’
Tulip slapped her hand away with annoyance.
‘Just…let me walk you back to your dorm room. It would make me feel better.’
‘Fine’ Emilia grinned widely. ‘If you insist.’

It was only when Emilia had reached the door to her room, that Tulip felt satisfied enough to finally leave.
‘See you around’ Tulip said to Emilia.
‘Sure thing, thank you!’
Tulip gave her a wave as she walked away, and Emilia entered her room, closing the door behind her.
She was alone in the room, and everything was silent.
The room was large, clean and tidy with everything in its place. Her bed and her roommates’ bed, Gloria’s bed, were on opposite ends of the room, a low and wide set of draws was against the wall between the beds, the windows above allowing the natural light to flood in.
At the start of the school year, the rooms were completely blank, but as time went by, the girls would personalise their rooms with whatever it is they wanted. Emilia’s side of the room was mostly empty, but Gloria’s side of the room was decorated with banners and bright colours.
Emilia walked forwards, leaning over the drawers and opening the window, pushing it outwards and breathing a heavy sigh.
Lovely.
Emilia climbed up onto the set of drawers, leaning against the wall beside the window, legs tucked up beneath her.
She smiled outside, reaching for the book below the window.
She opened it to where she had left off, head dipped as she began to read.

Several hours later, Gloria returned.
Emilia had dozed off, having closed her eyes for just a moment. She had fallen asleep where she had sat, head resting against the wall, the book laid down beside her, open on the page she had been reading.
Emilia opened her eyes upon hearing the door closing. She lifted her head, frowning slightly at the pain in her neck.
‘Ah, shouldn’t have closed my eyes.’
She saw Gloria smiling at her, blinking wearily, Emilia rubbed her eyes briefly.
‘Oh. H-hey.’
‘Did you fall asleep reading again?’ Gloria laughed.
‘Obviously.’
‘You know you always get aches sitting on the hard wood like that.’

‘I know’ Emilia said, rubbing the back of her neck as she swung her legs over the set of draws. ‘I just…like to see outside. And the breeze is nice and cool. And I like to hear the birds sing.’
‘You can hear the birds sing from your bed’ Gloria told her. ‘I wish you wouldn’t sit there, of all places. What if you fell out of the window?’
Emilia chuckled lightly, waving away this ridiculous notion.
‘What a ridiculous notion! And besides, the window is only half-open. There is no way I would fall out.’
Gloria pouted at her indignantly.
‘Are you making fun of me? I hope you’re not making fun of me.’
‘Of course not!’ Emilia slid off the top of the wooden drawers, straightening now, stretching like a cat, arms reaching high to the ceiling. ‘I want you to know that it would be a lot harder to kill me than a simple fall like that. In fact, I would go so far as to say that I am invincible, immortal even.’
‘And why would you say that?’ Gloria asked, placing her hands upon her hips. ‘I can’t wait to hear this.’
‘Because….’ Emilia grasped the air suddenly, body tense as if ready to pounce, ‘the world is mine!’
Gloria cocked her head at Emilia, blinking at her with a curious expression upon her face.
Emilia continued.
‘This world is completely mine, as if it came to me in an endless dream. My dream. Even you are nothing more than a ghost in my head. You cannot prove that you even exist outside my mind. I am the absolute centre of this world, its creator. I have no idea what will happen to it. If I die…’ Emilia shrugged carelessly. ‘I guess I don’t have a good imagination, I tried but I can’t imagine what it would be like if I were gone. What I'm saying is, its impossible for this world to disappear completely, but if I die, everyone else but me would simply vanish. I would be all who remains in this world once I'm gone. You are all just part of a dream that I am having. That’s why the world is mine. It’s all inside my head.’
‘Goodness, what on earth are you talking about?’
Emilia simply smiled at her, tilting her head playfully.
‘Do you like trains?’ Emilia asked.
‘Hu?’
‘Don’t worry about it’ Emilia shook her head. ‘I was only acting. So did you still want to go out tonight for a late-night swim?’
‘Yes absolutely’ she said eagerly, bouncing on the spot. ‘It’s so much more peaceful at night. And I’m still not as good as the others in my class. I definitely need more practice.’
‘Well, I just want to swim for fun.’
‘You don’t mind going out with me so late?’ Gloria asked tentatively.
‘Of course not. We’re friends aren’t we?’
‘Yeah!’ Gloria said enthusiastically, punching the air.
‘Great! So what do you wanna do to pass the time?’
‘Actually, I have some classwork I need to catch up on. Do you mind helping me?’
‘Sure thing.’
‘Aw thanks, you’re always so kind.’
‘Well, I try to be at least’ Emilia smiled.
‘Come on, let’s sit on my bed. I got some cupcakes, you want some?’
‘Sure.’

Gloria trotted over to her side of the room, kicking her shoes off before crawling up on the bed and leaning back against the pillows. Emilia was just sitting down before her as Gloria was taking her books out.
'What was it you were stuck with?' Emilia asked.
'Algebra.'
'Ugh! Can I retract my offer to help?'
'No way! You said you'd help me! No takesies-backsies.'
'Fine' Emilia sighed, resigned.
Gloria huffed with indignation, pouting as she pulled the books from her bag, dumping them in the space between them.
'So where are we starting first?' Emilia asked.
'Let me just find the right page' Gloria mumbled, picking up one of the books and flicking through the pages, brow furrowed in concentration and tongue poking out. 'Help yourself to some cakes' Gloria offered. 'They're just in my bag.'
'Aw sweet! I love red velvet. You've been out of school recently, haven't you?'
'Don't tell anyone' Gloria replied slyly, using the book the hide her mischievous expression. 'You know it's not allowed.'
During the weekdays, the gates of the school were closed, the students knew they were not allowed to leave. Only on the weekends were the gates opened. Many in this time would leave the school to visit the town and beaches nearby, some would leave for the weekend entirely to stay with family.
Gloria's parents ran a bakery, and from time-to-time Gloria would sneak out to see them, if only briefly, and to get some delicious cakes and treats while she was there. In the summer holidays she would work with her parents in the shop, to help them during the busiest times.
'OM NOM NOM NOM NOM.'
'Emilia, please try to eat quietly if you can.'
'Sorry.'
'And don't talk with your mouth full.'
pause
gulp
'Sorry.'
Gloria just rolled her eyes, shaking her head in exasperation.
'So unlady-like.'
'And when have I ever been a lady? I'm not trying to impress anyone.'
'I guess.'
Emilia took just one more of the red velvet cupcakes from the box, as beside her, Gloria scanned the pages of the book she held close to her face.
Emilia pulled the paper case off carefully, before ramming the whole thing into her mouth.
Dear mother in hell.

Yummy.

'So how good are you at these?' Gloria asked.
'Better than you' Emilia replied, once she had consumed the second cupcake.
'Hey, don't be mean!'
'I don't know why you suck so much.'
'You bully!'
'Hey, calm down, I'm only playing' Emilia giggled.

‘It’s not my fault the lessons are so boring. What do you want me to do?’
‘Nah, I get you. None of my older family ever used this crap once they left school. Except for my grandfather…...’
‘Can you help me with this part?’ Gloria asked, pointing to a certain place in the book.
Emilia glanced over the problem.
‘Sure, it’s pretty easy actually once you understand it. Let me show you.’
‘I’ve done it before but…I always seem to forget how.’
‘I’ll tell you how I remember, I use certain tricks, see?’
They stayed on the bed for a time until Gloria got tired of what they were doing, falling back against the headboard, and kicking her feet.
‘I guess you’ve had enough then?’ Emilia suggested.
Gloria huffed moodily, using her foot to push the books onto the floor.
‘This is dumb.’
‘Shall we do something else then?’ Emilia offered. ‘Let’s play a game. How about some chess?’
‘Oh no, not *that* game, you *always* win.’
‘All the more reason to practice’ Emilia said.
‘Yeah but, you’re like an expert at it.’
‘I’ve lost before’ Emilia reasoned.
‘Rarely. Didn’t you go to a bunch of chess clubs in your old school and stuff? Weren’t you champion?’
‘How do you know about that?’
‘Because you told me about it’ Gloria said in a monotone.
‘Oh. Right.’
Stupid brain.
Gloria began to kick her feet playfully, this time out of a teasing excitement.
‘Why don’t we play some cards instead?’ Gloria suggested. ‘There’s a ton of different games we can play. I got a deck here somewhere.’
‘Sounds good’ Emilia relented. ‘Let’s do that.’
Emilia watched as Gloria jumped off the bed, moving over to a drawer and rifling through it, searching for her deck.
She thought to herself.
My *perfect soul-mate would be smart enough to beat me in chess. I hope to find her someday. My knightess in shining armour….*
Gloria returned with a deck, shuffling the cards quickly.
They played several games, all of which Emilia lost.
‘Ahhhhhhh!’ Emilia fell forwards onto her face, arms limp beside her as she continued to moan in anguish into the sheets. ‘How could I lose? I tried so hard that last time.’
‘I told you more than once you’re playing wrong.’ Gloria said.
Emilia turned her head so she could be heard more clearly.
‘I disagree, this is all based on luck.’
‘You’re only saying that because you lost’ Gloria told her, shuffling the cards again before putting them away. ‘How are you so good at chest but not this?’
‘I guess its because my mind is so complex’ Emilia replied without a pause, ‘that it is far too advanced for simple games like this.’
‘Oh. Of course.’
Emilia pushed herself off the bed, sitting up properly again.

‘You see in chess, you need to think several steps ahead, and anticipate your opponent’s moves. You have to read their mind. Trap the king, and its all over!’
‘Right….’
Emilia turned her head away, feeling defeated, frustrated, and incredibly annoyed with herself. But there was no way she would reveal this to her friend.
‘Emilia? Are you ok?’
‘Absolutely ok I'm just peachy!’
‘Ok.’
‘Hey, it’s pretty dark outside. I think it’s time we went out.’
‘Holy smoke’ Gloria exclaimed, seeing the time on her phone. ‘It’s nearly midnight’
‘What a perfect time’ Emilia clapped her hands together. ‘Midnight. The time of lovers and mystery. The time where forbidden desire is finally released into deep and primal intimacy.’
‘Well, there’ll be no intimacy tonight’ Gloria spoke to her flatly, throwing a towel across the room to Emilia, hitting her in the face.
‘Ah! Why would you do that!’
‘Hurry up and get your swimsuit, I wanna get into the water. It’s going to be so much cooler at night. I always found night-time to be so peaceful and quiet.’
‘Fine.’
Emilia carried herself off the bed, grabbing a few things quickly and shoving them into her swimming bag, swinging it over her shoulder.
‘Ready slow-poke?’
‘What do you mean slow-poke?’ Gloria raised an eyebrow stoically. ‘I’m standing here waiting for you.’
Emilia skipped past Gloria, rushing out the door before her.
‘After you then I guess’ Gloria mumbled, stepping out into the hallway, and turning to lock their dorm room behind them.
Beside her Emilia was glancing about cautiously, making sure the coast was clear.
They were not allowed out of their dormitories at night, but as long as they could get out of this building, the rest would be easy. None of the other buildings were patrolled at night.
They would have to keep their eyes and ears open for any sign of the matron.
As soon as Gloria had locked their door, Emilia hurried off.
‘Emilia wait’ Gloria whispered furiously after her, before making her steps.
At the end of the corridor Emilia paused, glancing around the corner.
I feel like a spy.
There was no sign of any other soul, not a whisper.
Perfect.
Gloria made her way down the stairs nearby, leading the way. Emilia walked after her, holding the railing with one hand to steady herself.
They reached the ground floor.
The door to the outside world was locked. No problem. The window right beside it was open.
Easy Emilia thought to herself as she climbed through the window. *Woah!*
She stumbled, tipping forwards and falling flat on her front.
Gloria hastily helped her to her feet, pulling her up. Emilia adjusted her leg briefly, dusting herself down before hurrying away from the building. They escaped, and fled from the pool of light emitted from the lamps nearby. Together they slipped into the darkness.
‘The air is so fresh’ Gloria spoke quietly. ‘I love the night-time; the earth seems to slow down.’

‘Yeah’ Emilia nodded, ‘it’s pretty cool.’
They passed by a smaller building, heading around the backway, out of sight from the windows of the taller buildings around them. Upon the wall they passed a great mural. One of many that was hidden about the school. Painted by a student that had attended the school many years ago. Many simply called her ‘Gone Girl,’ after she had abruptly vanished from the school.
No one knew where she had gone or what had happened to her.
The painting was large, covering the entire wall. A depiction of a dark-skinned woman in a white dress, eyes tulip-red, hair thick and faded in colour. Beside her was a six-tailed fox, its fur violet-blue in hue, its body outlined in gold.
Even in the darkness it seemed to glow.
It was magnificent.

They reached the pool with no trouble.
‘I’m so glad they don’t lock the doors at night’ Emilia spoke in a whisper, not wanting to disrupt the peace.
‘Let’s hope they keep it that way’ Gloria replied, closing the door after her and following Emilia to the locker-room.
Gloria flicked the switch as Emilia dropped her bag on one of the benches.
They got dressed quickly into their swimsuits, heading towards the water.
‘Careful!’ Gloria whispered urgently as Emilia began to totter.
Emilia’s prosthetic foot had very little grip on the smooth surface of the floor, and she wobbled slightly as she walked.
‘I’m fine’ Emilia insisted, even as her movements became a little more precarious. ‘I’m not going to *fwaaahhh…!*’
Ow ow ow.
‘Gosh Emilia are you ok?’ Gloria exclaimed, hurrying over to her.
Emilia slumped her body in embarrassment, momentarily hiding her face, before forcing herself to look up at her roommate.
‘Ha ha. I’m fine. Honest! I just wanted to see what the view looked like from down here.’
‘Oh my gosh Emilia’ Gloria sighed shaking her head. ‘Come on, let me help you up.’
Emilia tentatively gathered her legs beneath her, accepting Gloria’s help as she offered Emilia her arm.
Gloria helped support Emilia the rest of the way to the pool.
‘Think you can manage now?’
‘Of course!’ Emilia replied indignantly. ‘I’m not an invalid! I just have a problem with gravity sometimes.’
‘Don’t we all.’
‘It’s not easy being so tall you know?’
‘Yes, I’m sure it’s terrible, being able to reach all the higher shelves.’
‘You’re making fun of me now, aren’t you?’
‘Of course I am’ Gloria scolded. ‘Now get in the pool.’
She let go of her friend’s arm, crouching down close to the water. Emilia leant forwards and slipped carefully into the water face-first.
‘Ah, so graceful’ Gloria sigh, bending down and sitting at the edge of the pool, watching Emilia swimming deeper underwater.
Moments later Emilia broke the surface, taking a deep gasp of air.

Ahhh…refreshing.
'Hey, aren't you coming in?' Emilia asked.
'Yes. I was just watching you.'
Emilia took off her prosthetic leg, throwing it over to Gloria, who caught it with both hands.
'Aren't you coming in?' Emilia asked, though her words could not be heard, as the lower half of her face was submerged in water.
She looked like a crocodile stalking its prey.
Not taking her eyes off Emilia, Gloria slipped into the pool, still holding the leg.
Then without warning she lobbed it across the pool, throwing it as far as she could.
'Mah leg!'
Emilia swam below the surface, heading towards it.
When she reached it, she threw it back to Gloria.
It became a game, and the two of them wore themselves out pretty fast.
A time later, they sat at the shallow end of the pool, leaning against the side.
'Ahhh' Emilia sighed tiredly as her leg bobbed gently in the water nearby, that was fun.
'Yeah…' Gloria closed her eyes, humming to herself quietly.
'No don't fall asleep' Emilia said to her, straightening up and slapping her cheek lightly.
'I'm getting cold' Gloria mumbled.
'You need to move around' Emilia told her. 'Let's swim a little longer, then go back. I don't know about you, but I for one am going to rest very well tonight.'

Chapter 9

It was a wonderful time.
When they were done, Emilia and Gloria headed back to their dormitories, going back the way they came. But as they rounded one of the corners, Emilia saw a figure in the distance.
She grasped Gloria firmly by the wrist, pulling her back.
'Emilia what…?'
'*Shhhh.* Look.'
Gloria looked in the direction Emilia was pointing.
'Is that…Sarah?' Gloria asked.
'What is that twit doing out at night?' She whispered. 'She knows it's not allowed.'
'But Emilia, *we're* out at night.'
Emilia conveniently ignored this, keeping her eyes on her nemesis.
'I have to know where she's going. I'm going to follow her.'
'*Emilia no!*' Gloria spoke in a furious whisper.
But Emilia had already made her way forwards, heading in the opposite direction to where their dormitories were, all the while keeping her eyes on the prey.
I got you, you little bastard.
'Emilia please come back!'

She ignored Gloria's hushed voice, instead continuing to move forwards.
Emilia followed Sarah to the edge of the school grounds, hiding behind a tree and watching from cover.
She saw as Sarah glanced briefly about her, still completely oblivious to the fact that she was being followed.
Gloria came up behind Emilia.
'Emilia. This is dangerous.'
'Hush now' Emilia replied. 'I'm concentrating.'
Gloria pursed her lips reluctantly, glancing over Emilia's shoulder towards Sarah.
Together they watched as Sarah moved to a point in the fence, pulling a section of it back and slipping through.
'Oh?' Emilia grinned excitedly, watching as Sarah hurried forwards, out of school territory and into the woodland, vanishing from sight. 'It looks like we have a breach in security.'
'Emilia, can we please go back now?'
'No way' she replied, straightening up, 'this just got interesting.'
'Emilia wait…'
But she had already left Gloria's side again, prancing forwards excitedly, practically skipping.
Gloria hung back, clinging to the tree they had been hiding behind. She glanced around tentatively, before slipping back into the shadows, hiding herself. She did not follow Emilia.

Emilia moved carefully through the woodlands. She was outside the boundaries of the school now, having followed Sarah's path through the broken section of fence.
Emilia had lost sight of her quarry, but she didn't worry too much. Emilia was sure she knew where Sarah was heading.
The cliffs of the beach.
Emilia moved carefully through the foliage. She felt like a terrifying beast moving through the wilds, stalking her prey, stalking Sarah.
I'm gonna get you, you little bitch.
Emilia reached a part of the landscape that began to slope steeply upwards, to the point she had to use her hands to crawl forwards, grasping onto the roots of the trees that protruded and twisted in all directions.
When she finally reached the lip of the hill she traversed, she straightened up, standing tall and brushing the leaves from her hair.
She let out a slow sigh, blinking slowly.
From where she stood, she could see a spectacular view of the sea before her, the cliffs curving around, on her right-hand side, growing to a great height.
Emilia tilted her head, looking towards these higher cliffs. Upon the highest point, were silhouettes standing against the moon-lit sky, two of them.
Ah? What's this?
Emilia turned on the spot, her heel causing the gravel to crunch as she did so. She began to make her way towards the pair, clinging to the shadows as crept along.
They could not see her as she lingered in the dark edges of the woodland to her side. But she could see them clearly against the sky.

As she went, she listened intently, hearing the sound of the ocean waves. It was pure serenity. And the moon…
It rested in the sky, nestled between the clouds comfortably. Its reflection shimmered upon the surface of the water.
Emilia broke her concentration from the two silhouettes only briefly to take in the view, before looking back towards her destination, her target.
She knelt in the dirt, finding a spot close to the pair. From this angle, neither of them would ever have seen her. She was a ghost.
I'm like Solid-Snake she grinned wickedly to herself. *Super-sneaky-like.*
She tilted her head, listening to the figures speak. She didn't need to strain her ears at all to hear them in the hushed night.
'….omise me you'll come back.'
'I will. I swear I will. I'd never abandon you.'
The first voice was Sarah's, and the other one…
Her lover?
Emilia carefully peered through the gaps in the bush, looking towards this other figure.
She couldn't make out much from this angle, not with the light of the moon behind them. But she could see that this figure was male, and that he was taller than Sarah. That was all.
They embraced now, kissing deeply.
Emilia frowned, narrowing her eyes and grinning.
How sordid.
She stayed for only a little longer, before the male figure left. Emilia could tell he was very reluctant to do so, they kissed and embraced one last time, before the male figure walked away.
Sarah remained where she was. She stood now, hunching her shoulders. Hugging herself as if she were cold. Emilia heard her draw a trembling breath.
The male figure was gone now, and Emilia rose to her feet, standing tall and making herself known.
'That was interesting.'
Sarah whipped around, body instantly tense, eyes wide in disbelief.
'…Emilia?! What the hell are you doing here?'
Emilia chuckled lightly, walking forwards, coming to stand by Sarah's side.
'What was that?' Emilia asked teasingly.
'What are you doing here?' Sarah snapped viciously at her. 'Why are you following me?'
Emilia shrugged.
'Curiosity' she replied carelessly.
'Are you…. are you….?'
'Hm?'
Emilia glanced over at Sarah. She was trembling now. Most likely in rage.
Looking down, Emilia could see her fists were clenched.
Her eyes flickered back up to Sarah's face.
'Are you going to tell the teachers that I left school?' Sarah spat at her.
'I mean… I could…' Emilia said nonchalantly.
Sarah slapped her then, doing so without warning.
A few seconds passed, as Emilia slowly processed what had just happened.
Her cheek stung badly.
Sarah had gotten in a good hit.

Emilia turned back to face Sarah, unfazed.
'You think this is a fucking game you little bitch' Sarah snarled. 'I'll fucking kill you.'
'Why? To keep me silent?' Emilia asked calmly. 'That's quite an extreme measure, don't you think?'
'Are you playing with me?'
'Do you really want to kill me?'
'What?'
Emilia walked past her, heading to the edge of the cliff now, facing out towards the sea.
'Go on then' Emilia said calmly. 'I'm completely vulnerable. I'm standing on the edge of the cliff. Maybe I just want a better look at the view. Maybe I'm a little clumsy…and I *slipped……*'
As she spoke, Emilia continued to stare out to sea, not turning around.
'……. how much do you really hate me?' Emilia asked, though this was a rhetorical question.
'You could push me you know? No one would ever know it was you.'
'What?' Sarah gasped. 'Are you crazy?'
'Maybe' Emilia replied, still staring towards the sea. 'But what does it matter?'
Emilia waited then, still not turning around.
'Go on' she prompted Sarah. 'What are you waiting for? If you don't do it, I could tell everyone your dirty little secret. The teachers would keep a very close eye on you. You'll never be able to leave the school again. You'll never see your precious little boy again. Wouldn't that be a shame?'
And this is the story…. of how I died….

Chapter 10

…. yeah……. I wish!
'What, you're not going to do it?'
Emilia turned back around, facing Sarah then.
'Let me help you.'
Emilia took a step back, beginning to tip off the edge of the cliff.
Sarah let out a cry of shock, reaching forwards and grabbing Emilia instinctively, holding her by the front of the shirt.
'Let me go Sarah' Emilia replied calmly. 'Don't you want me to plummet to my death therefore silencing me forever and keeping your secret, secret?'
'Are you crazy?' Sarah gasped; eyes wide.
Emilia shrugged carelessly, hands in the air and body completely relaxed.
'If you hate me so much, all you have to do is let me go. You won't be guilty. There is no moral dilemma here. I'm offering you this opportunity on a silver platter. You weren't even here at all. I just left school deciding to end my life, unable to carry on any longer due to this weight of depression I've been secretly carrying all my life. From the trauma of losing my beloved

mother, to everything else that came before, and after. You could end my suffering. All you have to do…is let me go.'
Sarah gritted her teeth, tears brimming in her eyes, though Emilia did not know why.
'I won't let you die' Sarah hissed, before pulling her back sharply.
Emilia fell forwards, landing on her front and coughing as dirt flew up in her face.
She blinked in surprise, briefly wondering what she was doing on the floor, instead of falling through the air and heading quickly towards the sea.
There was no water, no splash.
'What am I doing on the floor?' Emilia mumbled to herself.
'Do you really suffer from depression?' Sarah asked quietly.
Emilia rose to her feet, brushing the dirt from her clothes.
'Yes' she answered clearly. 'I do. But……I don't consider suicide a possibility at all. Every single day…I always try my best to live the best day I possibly can. For those I love, and for those who love me.'
'What about your mother? Do you miss her?'
'No.'
'No?' Sarah frowned. 'I don't understand.'
'We don't choose our family' Emilia replied simply. 'My mother never wanted me. And I never wanted *her* either.'
Dear mother in hell…
……I hope you're listening <3
'I…still don't understand.'
'Don't worry about it' Emilia shook her head. 'It's not important.'
Emilia smiled at Sarah then, a genuine smile, a friendly smile.
'I won't tell anyone of what happened here. I won't tell anyone of what I saw. Your secret is safe.'
'I….th-thank you' Sarah mumbled. 'I…should probably explain….at least a little bit. My…family are forcing me to go to this school. They dictate every single thing I do, right down to the food I eat.' Sarah swallowed the lump in her throat, gritting her teeth again. 'I hate them. All I want is to get away from them. They're trying to keep me away from…from…'
'That boy?'
Sarah nodded.
'His name is Ian. He's my soulmate. I want to spend the rest of my life with him, and I will *fight* to make that happen.'
'Let me guess, your family are trying to stop you?'
Sarah nodded silently.
'They don't understand him like I do' Sarah said. 'They don't understand *me*…but he does. He always has.'
'Hm.'
Emilia walked past her, going back the way she came.
'I won't tell anyone. It will be our little secret that we share together' Emilia said, pausing to glance back at her. 'Right?'
'Emilia.' Sarah's voice stopped her as she turned to walk away again.
'What?'
'I'd like to call a truce. I don't want to fight with you anymore' Sarah said to her.

‘What an excellent proposition!’ Emilia declared happily, casting her arms out dramatically as if she were performing in front of an audience. ‘In fact, I was about the suggest the exact same thing…’
‘Sure’ Sarah droned, but Emilia continued over her.
‘…after all, …does Caesar not say, ‘I destroy my enemy by befriending them’…. or was that Lincoln?’ Emilia shrugged. ‘I guess it doesn’t really matter.’
Sarah made a funny face.
‘Okay?’
‘Anyway, a truce sounds good to me’ Emilia winked back at Sarah, grinning widely at her. ‘Let’s shake on it.’
They did so, and Emilia stepped back again.
‘See yah!’ Emilia said.
She turned and walked away, practically skipping back into the woods.
Sarah remained where she stood by the cliff’s edge, watching as Emilia slipped out of sight.
‘What a weird girl…’

Chapter 11

As she was heading back, she saw Gloria jogging up to her.
‘I thought you said you weren’t coming with me’ Emilia replied calmly, slowing to a stop.
‘I couldn’t leave you on your own’ Gloria replied indignant, cheeks furiously red. ‘And besides…it’s a good thing I did come along in the end. If the worse happened, then at the very least you need a witness to this horrible crime.’
‘Crime?’
‘If she killed you.’
Emilia chuckled lightly.
How utterly amusing.
‘Oh Gloria. She wouldn’t have killed me.’
‘But…’
‘The cliff is perfectly safe. I know this area. People jump off that spot all the time for the fun of it. I’ve done it myself before, years ago when visiting friends. While I admit it is quite the fall, I assure you there is no danger. I was perfectly safe the whole time.’
‘Are you serious?’
‘Yes!’ Emilia chirped happily. ‘The pool below is deep and the rocks far, far from the surface. I don’t believe there’s ever been an accident around that area, like *ever*. So don’t worry!’
‘What? D-did Sarah know this?’
‘No.’
‘How do you know?’ Gloria asked frantically.
‘I could see it in her face.’
‘…...Oh….’
‘Don’t worry’ Emilia waved her away. ‘Everything is absolutely fine. There’s nothing to worry about.’
‘But…but…’

‘Hey’ Emilia smiled. ‘Let’s go back to our room. I’m *really* tired now.’
‘Yeah’ Gloria scowled, clearly unhappy with Emilia, and her complete nonchalance to what Gloria had thought was a serious situation. ‘I think I’m mentally exhausted myself.

That weekend, was a very special weekend for Emilia. She rarely got to leave the school, but on this particular weekend, things were different.
The gates of the school were left open, allowing the students to leave its grounds at their leisure. Emilia was making her way out of the school with her friends. She glanced towards one of the windows on the ground floor, the window to the library. Here she saw Sarah staring back at her from inside.
Sarah gave her a brief nod as Emilia went by, Emilia gave a nod back, before looking ahead again, continuing to walk with her friends.
‘Ah this is so much fun!’ Tulip exclaimed.
‘We haven’t even started doing anything yet’ her friend Coleen replied.
‘But I’m still so excited!’ Tulip replied.
‘I hope we can get something to eat’ Emilia mumbled.
‘Oh, they have great places to eat in the town’ Tulip gleamed excitedly, putting her hands together and grinning widely. ‘Oh! There’s this place…gosh I forget what it’s called. It’s by the beach and has a lovely place to sit outside.’
‘You mean The Chez Casimir?’ Coleen offered.
‘Hey I think that’s it!’ Tulip said.
‘Well…my brother’s fiancé kinda owns that restaurant.’
‘No way’ Tulip gasped. ‘What are the odd?’
‘I know’ Coleen smiled.
Emilia had been walking behind the two silently, observing the world around them.
As the three of them were making their way out of the school gates, Emilia noticed a figure that looked familiar, some distance away on the school grounds.
It took her just a few seconds to remember who this lady was.
I remember…that’s the gardener Bootsie. Dam what was her actual name?
Bootsie who had been pushing a wheelbarrow stopped then to wipe her brow, glancing up. Seeing Emilia, she offered a smile and a wave.
Emilia smiled back at her, giving her a brief wave in return.
‘Hey, are you keeping up back there?’ Coleen called out to Emilia.
‘Oh, yeah I’m coming!’
Emilia picked up her pace.
Together the three of them left the school grounds.

It was a gentle down-hill walk from the school to the town, and Emilia felt very happy as she went. Around them other students walked, heading in the same direction. Most of the students, almost all of them, took this opportunity to leave the school and look around. Some visited the local town, others went home for the weekend to visit their families, and some like Sarah, remained within the school.

They reached the town, a modest and humble place. It was very pretty here, and as Emilia glanced around, she couldn't help smiling widely to herself.
'Hey, look over there!'
Emilia ran off suddenly, heading towards one of the shops.
'Emilia wait!' Tulip called after her. 'Where are you going, come back!?'
But Emilia was too excited. Something had caught her attention in a big way.
Emilia darted through the door of the shop, coming back out less than a minute later.
'Emilia what are you doing?' Coleen asked with confusion.
'I have a sudden urge to move fast.' Emilia replied.
'What are you talking about?' Tulip raised an eyebrow. 'Did you just buy a skateboard?'
'Absolutely!' Emilia grinned, presenting it before her merrily.
She flipped it over, showing the picture underneath. There was a picture of a rabbit painted red, with pure black eyes, and body in a dramatic pose.
'Ok?' Coleen spoke carefully.
'Oh Emilia, you're so peculiar' Tulip added.
Emilia winked at her, throwing the skateboard on the floor before jumping on it and pushing herself forwards.
She skated backwards and forwards for a short time, performing a few flips as she did.
'Hey' Coleen grinned, leaning on a hip and placing a hand on her waist. 'You're actually pretty good.'
'Oh you think so?' Emilia replied, darting past her one last time before turning back.
Emilia stopped abruptly, flipping the skateboard and catching it.
'I used to skate a lot sometime ago. I haven't had a skateboard in a while.'
'How come?' Tulip asked.
'Well, my mother drove over my skateboard, it snapped in half. I uh…didn't expect it to be able to withstand the weight of a car.'
'Oh no' Coleen said, 'did you leave it outside?'
'No' Emilia shrugged.
The other two waited in silence, expecting her to elaborate. But she didn't.
'So, are we heading to this restaurant or what?' Emilia prompted.
'Oh yeah' Coleen snapped back to herself. 'Let's go.'

Tulip and Coleen walked side by side, walking at a casual pace as they headed towards the restaurant. Emilia was skating around them, back and forth and in circles, only stopping when they reached the restaurant.
'Ha!' Emilia said, catching up with the other two as they found a table outside the restaurant. She placed her skateboard on its side beneath her chair, declaring triumphantly. 'I only fell over twice.'
She sat down carefully in one of the chairs, reaching down and adjusting her leg.
'Are you ok?' Tulip asked.
'Yeah. It just gets a little uncomfortable at times.'
'I'll go in and order for us' Coleen said. 'You guys stay here. There's no need for all of us to go in.'
'Good idea. All that skating made me hungry' Emilia said. 'I'm so hungry. I might have accidentally missed breakfast by accident.'
'Same' Tulip added, reaching for one of the remaining menus still lying flat on the table.

Emilia and Coleen already had theirs open, reading through it.
‘I’m also very thirsty’ Emilia added.
‘Well when you decided let me know and I will order for us’ Coleen said.
‘How good is your memory?’
Coleen lowered the menu, glancing towards Emilia with narrowed eyes.

Coleen returned a short time later, and not long after that, a waitress came over to them, bringing their order. Various drinks and sandwiches and some cookies, most of which were ordered by Emilia.
‘Why did you order so much?’ Tulip asked.
‘I’m going to save it for later’ Emilia explained, tearing open the packaging of her sandwich. ‘Gloria would be so mad if I faint again.’
‘Faint?’ Coleen asked.
‘Sometimes I forget to eat’ Emilia explained briefly, before shoving the delicious salmon and cucumber sandwich into her mouth, with no further explanation.

The three of them enjoyed their time together, talking about sweet nothing, eating their snacks and drinking. It was a good time.
It was at this moment, when Emilia voiced a thought.
‘I want a get a job.’
‘A job?’ Coleen echoed.
‘…. yeah.’
‘Why?’
‘Why else?’ Emilia grinned. ‘Money.’
‘Of course,’ Coleen sigh.
‘What sort of job do you want?’ Tulip asked her.
‘I don’t know’ Emilia pondered. ‘I suppose it doesn’t really matter. Anything that pays money.’
‘All jobs pay money’ Tulip said to her.
‘Something that pays decent money then…. I’m not sure…hmm. I’d like to work….’ Emilia fell silent for a few moments as she thought. ‘In a shop.’
Tulip watched her closely, a curious expression on her face. Coleen on the other hand was more occupied with her drink.
Emilia rose to her feet abruptly and without warning, a look of determination suddenly enveloped her.
‘I have to go!’ she declared dramatically.
‘What?’ Tulip squeaked, alarmed at this. ‘Where are you going?’
‘I’m going job hunting!’
Coleen sighed, leaning forwards and resting her chin on her palm.
‘You always were so peculiar.’
‘Hey’ Emilia smiled excitedly. ‘I’ll see you guys later ok?’
‘Wait, you’re really going?’ Tulip said, concern laced her voice now.
‘Of course! What better time than the present. Eh?’
‘Ack’ Coleen looked suddenly uncomfortable. ‘Job-hunting is so scary!’

‘Well,’ Emilia gleamed, ‘true success is walking from failure to failure with no loss of enthusiasm. After all, you miss 100% of the shots you don’t take. And besides, the questions isn’t, ‘who is going to let me’, but more ‘who is going to stop me’, right?’
Emilia giggled then.
‘Winston Churchill, Wayne Gretzky, Ayn Rand.’ Emilia nodded to Tulip and Coleen respectively. ‘Excuse me ladies.’
Emilia straightened her posture, kicking the skateboard up and grabbing it.
She turned on her heel and marched away, doing so proudly and without a backwards glance.
Until she walked a few steps away.
Then she awkwardly returned.
‘Forgot your stuff?’ Tulip asked flatly, as Emilia shoved her sandwiches and drinks in her bag.
‘Ah. Yes’ Emilia blushed uncomfortably. ‘Silly me.’
She patted herself down, straightening her clothes before striding off again, walking with pride and confidence.
The two remaining girls watched her go, both experiencing slight confusion.
Tulip broke the silence between them.
‘Ha ha…typical Emilia.’
Coleen frowned at Tulip, shaking her head.

Later that afternoon, Emilia returned to her dorm room, speaking enthusiastically to her room-mate.
‘I got the job!’
‘Mmm. What job? Why do you have a skateboard?’
Gloria had been unwell the last few days. She had a fever and had stayed in her room for this time, friends were bringing her food and checking up on her regularly. Emilia was doing the same. The matron was aware she was unwell, and the school doctor had checked on her several times already.
The doctor was a lovely lady, and told Gloria just to rest. Gloria had done so.
This was the best place for her to heal. Her own bed.
‘I went job-hunting’ Emilia elaborated excitedly, holding up a piece of paper. Some kind of form. ‘And I got the job! Aren’t I amazing?’
‘Oh wow’ Gloria mumbled, forcing a smile. ‘When did you start looking?’
‘Today.’
‘What?’
Emilia put the paper aside, putting her bag and her brand-new skateboard carefully away and walking back towards Gloria.
‘How are you feeling?’ Emilia asked sincerely, kneeling beside her bed.
‘Hmmm.’
‘Still pretty rough hu?’
‘Yeah, kinda.’
Gloria’s voice was very weak.
Emilia smiled sadly at her friend.
‘You know, I wish there was something I could do.’
Gloria rolled onto her side, smiling up at Emilia, pulling the bedsheet tighter around her.
‘You’ve already done so much for me. Thanks for looking after me all this time.’ She huffed, her dampened expression returning again. ‘I wish I had gotten better by now.’

‘Yeah, but you can’t force yourself to get better faster. The best you can do is rest and relax. And that’s it! Hey, are you hungry?’
‘Haaa…um…n-not really but…I should probably eat something.’
‘When was the last time you ate?’
‘Well…’
‘What did you eat?’ Emilia asked.
‘You know…I can’t really remember…’
Emilia growled at her then, much like a feral dog.
Honestly, its usually me who’s getting lectured about not eating….
‘H-hey, there’s no need to be like that.’
‘You know I’m only trying to care for you’ Emilia said sulkily.
‘Yeah. Thanks. I…. mmm…really appreciate it.’
Emilia watched her silently for a moment, before reaching forwards.
‘You’re still boiling hot.’
Emilia withdrew her hand from Gloria’s forehead.
‘I’ll get you some fresh hot food from the cafeteria’ Emilia said. ‘They’ll be open by now.’
‘Thanks Emilia.’
She rose to her feet.
‘Stay put ok? I don’t want you wandering off.’
‘Sure’ Gloria chuckled weakly. ‘I’m not going anywhere.’
Emilia gave a curt nod, satisfied, before marching briskly out of the room.
‘Guard the place while I’m gone’ she called back to her roommate, before snapping the door shut behind her, and making her way down the hall with a spring in her step.

She picked up some food from the cafeteria, carrying it on a tray back to their dorm room.
She was surprised to see other figures in the room now, standing beside Gloria’s bed.
Is that…her parents….and…little brother?
‘Oh…Emilia…’
Emilia straightened awkwardly as the door swung shut behind her.
‘H-hey gurl’ Emilia gleamed back.
‘Is this your roommate?’ the young boy asked.
He was sitting at the end of Gloria’s bed, shoes off and legs crossed.
‘Yeah, that’s my roommate, her name is Emilia. Isn’t that right?’
‘It sure is.’
‘Oh, you got me food.’
Emilia glanced down tentatively at the tray she carried.
‘Bring it over’ Gloria offered, ‘I’m actually feeling hungry now.’
‘It’s great that you’ve got your appetite back’ Emilia said to her friend.
She placed the tray upon the table beside the bed, stepping back and smiling up at Gloria’s parents.
‘This is my mum and dad.’
‘It’s nice to meet you’ Emilia nodded politely.
They both introduced themselves to Emilia, and introduced their son to her too. She waved at him, and he waved back.
‘Well,’ Emilia said, taking a step towards the door. ‘I think I’m going to head out.’

‘Oh, you don’t have to leave’ Gloria protested.
‘No no it’s ok. There’s something I have to do anyway. I should go.’
‘Awww, are you sure?’
‘Yeah yeah’ Emilia smiled, shuffling closer to the door. ‘Well…it was lovely to see you all. Gloria, I’ll see you later.’
Emilia fled, slipping through the door as quickly as she could before Gloria had a chance to speak.
Emilia stood in the hall, leaning back against the door, letting out a deep breath.
She shook her head, straightening up and walking briskly away.
I think I need some alone time…

Chapter 12

Emilia sat alone now, in a secluded part of the school.
No one could see her from where she was. Emilia hugged her knees to her chest, head down and cheek resting on her knees.
Behind her was a large section of wall that stood alone, out in the field away from the other buildings.
Upon the wall was painted a beautiful mural. A vast blue sky scattered with stars. Suspended in the air against the crescent of the moon, was a woman in a beautiful flowing white dress, pulling back a mighty bow. The trees growing beneath her and to the side curled around her, framing her figure.
Emilia lifted her head, eyes downwards. She raised a hand, brushing her cheek.
She looked ahead of her. A short distance away was the fence that ran around the whole property, a chain-link fence. Beyond this, was wild and unkempt wilderness.

Emilia stared out at it, eyes out of focus.
She let out a slow breath, and began to sing.

‘They tell me what to wear every single day
They tell me what to do, tell me what to say
I’m done…

They tell me what to eat, tell me what to drink
I’m pretty sure that soon, they’ll tell me what to think
I’m done…

I wish there was a place where I can be who I choose to be
A place where all my dreams can live and they’ll no longer be dreams
A place where I can do all the things that all the free kids do

But I'm sure that's just inside of me
Cause this is just the way it is

They tell me that I'm wrong even though I'm right
They tell me that "Princesses don't put up a fight''
I'm done…

They say I should be nice, be extra polite
They say that I should act like I'm a future bride
I'm done…

I wish there was a place where I could dress just how I wanna dress
A place where I can be and sing and dance how I choose to dance
A place where all my fears can go and hide, hide into another place
But I guess that's just inside of me
Cause this is just the way it is….'

Emilia trailed off into silence, shoulders slumped.
'Hm…what's wrong with me?'
Since when did I become so weak…?
A few moments of silence passed. Eventually Emilia decided to move, having become a little uncomfortable, parts of her becoming numb. She shifted, grimacing.
'Ow ow ow' she growled to herself, grabbing her prosthetic leg, pulling it off.
Not these phantom pains again…
Emilia dropped the leg beside her, beginning to massage her stump.
She huffed again, sulking now.
Emilia checked her watch briefly, before rolling over to her side, peering around the wall.
From here she was completely concealed. There were some trees and bushes that grew close to the wall, and she could see through the leaves, but no one from a distance away would be able to see her at all.
Emilia watched a group of girls a distance away across the field, focused on one in particular.
'Naomi….'
She had rose-red dyed hair falling freely about her shoulders, thick black-rimmed glasses and a strong build.
'Hey bitch.'
Emilia grumbled, leaning back and glancing around.
'What do you want Sarah?'
'Oh? What's this? I've never seen that expression before. Are you watching someone? Wow, I never considered you to be a stalker type.'
'I'm not the stalking type' Emilia droned back.

‘So, which one are you watching?’ Sarah asked her, stepping fully around the wall now, approaching Emilia, holding her hands behind her back.
Emilia glanced towards Sarah, answering only reluctantly.
‘The one with the pink hair.’
‘You mean Naomi?’
‘Yeah.’
‘Oh wow.’
‘Oh wow what?’
‘Nothing nothing’ Sarah answered hastily. ‘It’s nothing at all.’
‘If you know something I don’t then just tell me.’
‘I don’t know anything.’
‘Sure.’
Sarah moved closer to Emilia, sauntering, hands still behind her back.
‘I’ve never seen you so pissy before.’
‘I’m not pissy’ Emilia retorted.
‘Yeah you are.’
Emilia raised an eyebrow curiously as Sarah sat down on the ground near her, though maintaining a space between them.
‘What?’ Emilia asked. ‘Wanna talk?’
Sarah leaned forwards, legs crossed and holding her feet. She grinned at Emilia in a way she didn’t quite like.
Emilia frowned back, a little unnerved.
‘I want to talk’ Sarah said.
‘We’re already talking.’
‘Hmmm’ Sarah smiled.
‘What?’
‘I’m trying to help you here.’
‘Oh?’
Sarah raised an eyebrow at her, copying her expression. ‘You know there’s no point in just sitting here and watching from a distance. Why don’t you speak to her?’
Emilia grimaced, hugging herself tighter.
‘What if she says *no*?’ she mumbled.
‘Then the answer would always have been *no*. Don’t you think it’s best to find out?’
‘That’s easy for you to say’ Emilia huffed at her, still not looking towards her. ‘You’re already going out with someone.’
‘And how do you think that happened?’
‘What do you mean?’
‘I had to sum up the courage to speak to him for the first time. Do you have any idea how terrified I was?’
‘Are you seriously opening up to me?’ Emilia asked, finally turning her head to face Sarah, looking her in the eye.
‘Yup. We did call a truce after all, didn’t we?’
‘I guess you’re right.’
‘You certainly put your trust in me’ Sarah went on. ‘Didn’t you. I guess it makes sense that I want to help you.’
‘You want to help me?’

Sarah frowned then, quickly glancing away.
'Don't…don't make this weird.'
'Sorry.'
'I just want to…. I don't know. If you were one of my friends, I'd do the same.'
'Does that make us friends then?' Emilia smirked, 'since you're trying to help me.'
'No way' Sarah spoke promptly, her tone short. 'Don't push your luck' she finished sharply.
'Fine.'
A silence passed between them.
'Anyway, what I was going to say…. if you *were* my friend, which you're *not*, but if you were, I would encourage you to talk to this girl. I know it's scary. I've been there. When I first approached my now boyfriend, oh my god it was a total mess.'
'What happened?' Emilia asked, glancing towards her.
'Curious now? I hate this memory. No, that's not really true. I guess it would make a funny story to tell our children when they're old enough.'
'You guys are pretty serious then hu?'
'Yup. I want to marry him, house, kids, the whole thing…. anyway.' Sarah scratched at her cheek uncomfortably, going a little red then. 'Um, when I first spoke to him, I had a nosebleed.'
Emilia instantly sniggered.
'Shut up. Anyway. Um, I was talking to him, God I was nervous, and he was giving me a funny look, I was horrified when he um…said…. that I was….and uh…. I got nervous and sneezed.'
'AHAHAHAHAHAHAAHAHAAA!'
'It's not that funny' Sarah huffed.
'It really is' Emilia giggled. 'God, I wish I was there! AHAHAHAHAH.'
I'm fucking dying!
'Well, I'm glad I managed to make you laugh' Sarah rolled her eyes.
'So, what happened after that?'
'Well, I was crying in the toilets, thinking that my life was over…but…well, long story short, my friend spoke to him, and uh…he came to find me…'
Sarah trailed off.
'…the rest is history.'
'That's so sweet.'
Sarah smiled.
'Whatever,' she looked away sharply then, her movements seemingly agitated, but there remained a slight smile upon her face.
Emilia took a slow and steady breath, brow furrowed suddenly in determination.
I can do this!
'Alright!'
'Hm?' Sarah glanced back at her.
'I'm gonna do it.'
'Oh cool.'
'You need to go away' Emilia told Sarah, waving her away feverishly.
'What's this?' Sarah sniggered. 'Is that you being insecure?'
'I'm about to do something super-scary' Emilia said to her, not looking in her direction. 'And I think you should leave.'
Sarah stared at her for a few moments longer, before smirking again. She unfolded her arms, rising to her feet, she turned and walked away.

‘Alright then, good luck.’
But Emilia barely heard her. Her concentration was still fixed on Naomi.
I can do this. I can do this.
Emilia stood, striding forwards, doing so without a pause so as not to give herself time to begin to doubt herself.
Not gonna do it. Not gonna doubt or overthink. Just face it and get it over with. What’s the worst that can happen?
She then gave a feeble giggle to herself, palms sweating profusely.
Save me Jesus.

She approached Naomi, who was standing with her friends. But Emilia only saw *her*, her vision tunnelled.
Emilia stood there awkwardly for a few seconds, until the girls began to notice her.
One of them spoke. ‘Are you ok?’
‘Uh…. yeah’ Emilia smiled awkwardly.
The edges of her lips began to twitch, more like a sort of spasm than anything else.
Why is my face doing that? How do I stop it? It must be the nerves.
‘C-can I speak to Naomi alone?’ Emilia said.
There was a slight pause. The other girls hesitated, unsure of the situation. No doubt this was all very strange to them.
At long last Naomi broke the silence.
‘I’ll meet up with you guys later’ she said to her friends.
‘Do you want me to stay?’ one of them said.
‘No, it’s ok. I’ll be fine. I won’t be long. You guys go on ahead.’
Slowly they wandered off, a few of them sending curious glances back at them both.
Naomi waited until her friends were some distance away before glancing back to Emilia and speaking.
‘So what’s up?’
‘Uh.’
Emilia felt her heart in her throat, the sound of blood rushing through her hears, her mouth dry like dry sand.
She couldn’t even think at all by this point.
‘Are you ok?’ Naomi asked.
‘Y-yes.’
Emilia clenched her hands, her body actually beginning to tremble now. She hoped Naomi didn’t notice.
Since when was I so weak?
‘What do you want?’
‘I have a crush on you and wanted to know if you would go out with me’ Emilia blurt out.
Naomi seemed taken aback.
Emilia stood frozen to the spot, terrified.
‘Oh’ Naomi finally said. ‘I’m sorry, I don’t feel that way about you. I don’t even really know you.’
‘W-well maybe you can.’
Oh my god I sound desperate.
‘It isn’t like that’ Naomi said, ‘what I meant was, I am not that way inclined.’

‘You’re not?’
‘No. Sorry. I’m flattered though.’
Emilia stood there, unable to process. She had not considered what she would do at this point.
Naomi stared at her.
‘Are you ok? You look a little…’
Emilia’s hand went to her head then, and she looked downwards.
‘I feel a little…. light-headed…’
Emilia’s vision began to cloud over.
‘I….’
She collapsed, completely losing consciousness.

Chapter 13

Emilia had a strange dream that made no sense. Not that dreams made much sense anyway. She dreamed of sharks biting her, and her scrambling up the side of a boat to try to get away from them.
Eventually, she heard some sounds, thinking that it was in her dream. But then realising she was dreaming.
And then the dream went away.
Emilia opened her eyes.
She blinked, staring up at the ceiling for a few moments, before turning her head to the side.
At first, she felt confusion, having no idea where she was. She couldn’t even remember what had happened preceding waking up here.
And then it slowly dawned on her.
No…no…
Emilia rolled on her side, remembering Naomi.
Noooooo…
Tears began to brim in her eyes, and she cried silently.
‘Emilia?’
She started then, quickly rubbing her eyes.
Emilia glanced over her shoulder, looking behind her and blinking blearily at the figure standing in the doorway.
She was in a small room alone, in the hallway beyond were faint sounds and distant voices.
‘You’re finally awake.’
‘Ella?’
‘That’s my name.’
‘What am I doing here?’
Ella sighed heavily, stepping into the room.

‘Did you hit your head when you fell?’ Ella said, sitting on the edge of her bed. ‘Oh yeah you did’ Ella went on, brushing Emilia’s hair back carefully. ‘I was actually joking but…’ she paused. ‘You look confused.’
‘I am a little.’
‘I carried you here.’
‘Of course you did’ Emilia smiled.
Ella was a sporty-type, and very muscular for a girl. She was always lifting weights in her spare time.
‘I guess it’s lucky you were around’ Emilia said.
‘Naomi came to find me. She said you two were talking and you suddenly fell.’
Oh, dear god.
‘Did you forget to eat again?’ Ella asked. ‘And I didn’t realise you were friendly with Naomi.’
‘I…did forget to eat. And um…. we’re not really friends uh…I was just talking to her.’
‘Right?’
Ella stared at her, but Emilia did not elaborate.
Oh good I don’t think Naomi said anything…
‘It’s a really bad habit by the way’ Ella said at last. ‘You keep doing this. It’s not good for you.’
‘I don’t want to hear it’ Emilia mumbled into her pillow. ‘I don’t wanna hear another lecture about health and fitness…’
‘You know I don’t mean to nag.’
Emilia said something then, but she could not be understood. All that Ella heard was muffled complaints as Emilia spoke into her pillow, hugging it to her face.
‘Please speak clearly’ Ella sighed.
Emilia lifted her head, glancing to Ella.
Emilia was about to speak when the door to the room opened again, and a figure walked in.
Well, hobbled in. There was another figure beside this first one, helping to support her.
The girl with green hair walked on one leg, her other leg lifted, ankle held tenderly. She was leaning on the girl beside her, who helped her walk.
Oh, its Shannon…
‘Oh, I'm sorry to interrupt’ the girl who supported her green-haired friend said. ‘I hope we’re not bothering you; this room is closest so…’
‘It’s ok’ Emilia mumbled.
Emilia and Ella sat quietly for a few moments as the brown haired girl helped the green haired girl to one of the beds empty beds. There were three in the room in total, two now occupied.
‘I’ll be back in a second’ the brown-haired girl told Shannon. ‘Just stay here.’
‘I’m not going anywhere’ Shannon smiled back.
Her friend went away hastily to get the nurse, leaving Shannon alone with the other two girls.
‘What happened Shannon?’ Ella asked her. ‘Are you ok?’
‘Yeah,’ Shannon replied, ‘I just had a bit of an accident. I landed awkwardly doing ballet practice and twisted my ankle.’
‘Oh, sounds painful’ Ella winced.
‘Yeah, it kinda is’ Shannon grimaced.
Emilia watched Shannon silently, unable to stop staring at her hair.
Still looks like a cabbage….
Seconds later the door opened again, and the nurse entered, shortly followed by Shannon’s friend.

Emilia stayed in the room for a short time only. She was given some food to eat and sent on her way.
Emilia wandered the grounds aimlessly for a while after that, choosing to stay alone.
She was supposed to be in class but, at this time, she could not bring herself to attend.
She couldn't stop herself from thinking of Naomi.
I can't believe I fainted in front of her.
She felt so ashamed.
Emilia buried her face in her hands, struggling to fight back the tears.
She straightened then, fixing an expression of determination upon her face.
Emilia walked across the grounds, moving to a secluded area, a section where there were trees and flowers, and a section of wall upon which was a mural painted by the mysterious 'Gone Girl.' It was a beautiful picture of a beautiful girl swinging a paintbrush in an otherwise grey painting, from the tip of the paintbrush ran a stream of rainbow colours.
Here Emilia sat, tucking herself away and out of sight of the building's windows, so that no one else could see her.
She took off her false leg, rubbing the stump, before slumping back with a sigh.
She sat there for a moment, before curling up, crying silently into her folded arms as she hugged her knees to her chest.

Chapter 14

'I think you should take up a new hobby' Gloria was saying to her.
'But I don't want to' Emilia yawned.
She lay on the bed now, stretching out like a cat, one leg up in the air, her arms above her head, her other leg on the floor.
'I just want to sit indoors and read poetry' Emilia went on.
It had been a few days since Naomi had rejected her, and Emilia, while she had seemed to have retained her happy composure, had kept more to herself.
When she wasn't in lessons, Emilia had stayed in her dorm room, reading and doing little else.
'I think you should do something a little more physical' Gloria told her. 'It will keep your mind distracted, not to mention it's good for your body.'
'And how do you know what's good for my body? Also is that an invitation?' Emilia asked teasingly, turning her head towards Gloria and raising an eyebrow.
'In your dreams' Gloria replied flatly.
'So, what do you think I should do?'
'Well,' Gloria thought aloud. 'You've never really shown much interest in the riding stables.'
'There's a good reason for that' Emilia said to the ceiling. 'I don't like horses at all. I touched one once, and you can't get the smell off yourself. No matter how much you wash, the stink of horse is still there. Plus, they're dangerous.'
'Dangerous?'
'They could kill you.'

‘You could die walking down the street’ Gloria countered.
‘That’s a comforting thought’ Emilia droned.
‘There are safety measures for the horses. Wearing helmets is a requirement.’
‘What if I get kicked in the face?’
Gloria sighed. ‘Ok then, something else.’
‘Right. Well, I used to do kickboxing, but it was never the same after the doctor took my leg.’
‘Right.’
Gloria pondered to herself for a few moments.
‘What about gymnastics?’ Gloria offered.
Emilia was silent.
‘Is that a thoughtful silence?’ Gloria prompted.
‘Hm.’
‘I think gymnastics would be great’ Gloria repeated. ‘I do it from time to time and…. I think it would be good for you.’
‘Ok’ Emilia relented. ‘I guess you’re right.’
‘You don’t have to huff like that.’
‘I didn’t.’
‘I’ll talk Annabel’ Gloria said.
‘Who dat?’
‘She’s head of the gymnastic team. She’s so pretty. Even *I* can’t help but stare at her.’
Emilia’s ears perked up then.
‘Right?’
‘She’s been doing gymnastics since she was very young’ Gloria went on. ‘She’s so talented.’
Is she flexible I wonder?
‘Ok’ Emilia said. ‘I think you’re right. But you’ll go with me won’t you? I don’t want to go alone.’
‘Absolutely.’
Emilia sighed. ‘That’s a relief.’
‘You’re not scared, are you?’
‘Of course not’ Emilia told the ceiling. ‘I just like your company.’
‘Ok then.’
Gloria rose to her feet suddenly.
‘Then let’s go!’
‘Now?’
‘Of course,’ Gloria said, turning back to her, ‘no time like the present, right? Now get up. I’m tired of seeing you sulking on your bed.’
‘I wasn’t sulking’ Emilia grumbled, sitting up and grabbing her prosthetic leg from the floor, quickly fixing it in place.’
She rose to her feet too quickly and fell forwards.
Gloria heard a crash. She glanced around to see Emilia on the floor.
‘Ow ow ow.’
‘Are you alright Emilia?’ Gloria asked, only half-concerned.
‘Yup yup’ Emilia hastened, quickly rising and acting like nothing had happened. ‘I’m coming.’

Minutes later, Emilia and Gloria stood side by side in front of Annabel in the gym hall.
Emilia glanced Annabel up and down briefly, when she was looking at Gloria, before meeting her eyes again.
She's so beautiful.
'I'd love to teach you' Annabel was saying.
'That's great' Gloria smiled, looking back at Emilia excitedly. 'We can practice together. That's exciting right?'
'Yeah, excited' Emilia echoed.
Her eyes travelled over Annabel's body again quickly, roving over her tall and lean frame, before snapping back to attention.
'When would you like to start?' Annabel asked them both with a smile.
Gloria spoke up before Emilia had a chance to do so.
'Well, you're practicing now, aren't you?' Gloria smiled sweetly.
'Yes I am.'
'We could start now' Gloria said. 'Wouldn't that be great?' she said to Emilia with a big grin.
'Oh yeah' Emilia grinned back. 'Very great.'
This is all happening so fast. How did I even get here? I few minutes ago I was on my bed, now this…?
'Do you have anything you can change into?' Annabelle asked them both.
'We do, don't we?' Gloria asked glancing towards Emilia.
'Oh yes. Well I do, I got some shorts and a shirt in my bag…'
'Good' Annabel nodded. 'That's great. You can get changed in the locker room then meet me back here.'
'Ok!' Gloria spoke for both of them. 'Come on Emilia.'

Moments later, they were back in the gym hall with Annabel.
'So, you wanna practice gymnastics' Annabel began, 'the most important thing first of all, is to remember to do your stretches. It helps to loosen up your muscles. If you forget to do your stretches, then you might do yourself an injury.'
Hmmmm.
'Ok, let's start with leg muscles' Annabel said, before lifting one of her legs vertically, holding it perfectly straight, toes pointed to the ceiling.
She stood with one leg straight and supporting her weight, and the other pointed directly up towards the ceiling.
Her form was perfect.
'I don't think I can do that' Emilia said.
'Nor me' Gloria added with an awkward chuckle.
'Oh, sorry' Annabel said, lowering her leg and standing straight again, 'I already forgot you're new to this. I usually teach girl who've been doing this sort of thing for years.'
Hmmmm.
'That's alright' Gloria smiled. 'But maybe we can start with something a little easier.'
They continued stretching for a few minutes, before Annabel showed them one of her simpler routines. Neither Emilia nor Gloria were very good, but they both had fun. Then Emilia's leg fell off at an inopportune moment.
'Please stop laughing' Emilia groaned, picking herself off the floor.

‘Sorry’ Gloria replied, continuing to snigger behind her hands. ‘The helpless wail you did before you hit the ground was just too perfect.’
‘Ugh.’
Emilia was just sitting up, rubbing the back of her head with a grimace.
She was just about to go get her prosthetic leg, when someone handed it to her.
Emilia glanced up, seeing a face she recognised.
‘Oh hey.’
I must have hit my head harder than I thought. Dam what was her name again?
Shannon smiled as Emilia took the leg from her.
‘Th-thanks.’
‘No worries’ Shannon grinned. ‘Does that happen a lot?’ she asked. ‘Doesn’t it fit properly?’
Emilia stared up at her, slack-jawed.
‘Shannon.’
‘Yes, that’s right’ she replied. ‘Wait, did you forget my name?’
‘Of course not! Don’t be silly.’
‘Right.’
‘Anyway, thanks’ Emilia said, fixing her leg back in place and rising to her feet.
‘What are you guys doing here anyway?’ Shannon asked, glancing from Emilia to Gloria.
‘I thought it would be a good idea to get Emilia out of her room to stop her sulking.’ Gloria explained. ‘It’s always fun to try a new hobby, right?’
‘Sulking?’ Shannon questioned.
‘She got um…rejected by her crush.’
‘Ouch’ Shannon said flinching. ‘Sorry Emilia.’
‘How’s our ankle?’ Emilia suddenly asked, changing the subject.
‘It feels much better, thank you for asking.’
‘That’s great’ Emilia smiled, a little too enthusiastically.
‘Anyway’ Shannon went on. ‘I should get going. See you.’
Shannon hurried off, back to her other friends and continuing her day.
Emilia stared after her.
‘Are you alright Emilia?’ Annabel asked, having returned to check on them.
‘Yeah, I’m fine.’
‘Then let’s continue.’

Emilia and Gloria continued their stretches for a few minutes, before moving onto beginner gymnastic movements. They did balancing, rolls, poses called the bridge, tripod, and many more, all under the guiding words of Annabel, who made all of it look so easy as she demonstrated.
They did this for about half an hour, before Annabel called for them to stop.
‘That’s enough for today, you don’t want to overdo it in the beginning. It’s best to start small before moving onto other more difficult things and longer lessons.’
‘I suppose you’re right’ Emilia replied, sighing heavily and rubbing at her leg. ‘I would love a rest now anyway.’
‘You don’t have any classes now, do you?’ Gloria asked Emilia.
‘Not for a while.’
‘You’re free! Me too. Annabel, we’ll see you later in the next lesson?’

‘Yes,’ she smiled, nodding to Gloria. ‘Same time tomorrow? I have a class to teach now, so I have to go.’
‘Ok, same time tomorrow. Come on Emilia.’
‘Ok.’
They walked out of the gymnasium side by side, heading back into the sunlight.
When they stepped out, Emilia put a hand to her forehead, sighing heavily.
‘Are you ok?’ Gloria asked.
‘I’m…feeling a little light headed.’
‘When was the last time you ate? Did you have breakfast?’
‘Yes.’ Emilia sighed again.
‘Yes?’ Gloria echoed, furrowing her brow at her. ‘Today I mean? Did you have breakfast *today*?’
‘Of course?’
Gloria rolled her eyes. ‘You haven’t eaten since then have you.’
This wasn’t a question, but a statement.
Emilia just chuckled lightly.
‘Come on’ Gloria said, grabbing Emilia lightly by the wrist and tugging her along. ‘Let’s find a place to sit before you collapse.’

A short while later, and Emilia was sitting alone, leaning back on the bench, eyes closed, hand to her head.
She only straightened up when she heard movement, footsteps coming her way.
Emilia sat up, smiling at Gloria who approached.
‘Here’ she said, offering Emilia food and drink.
Emilia took it gratefully, pulling the straw off the carton and stabbing it.
She finished the orange juice in a few seconds.
‘Slow down’ Gloria scolded, ‘you’ll give yourself indigestion.’
‘You’re right’ Emilia said. ‘I’ll try to remember that.’
She tore the packet of the sandwich open and started eating. It was tuna, and it was tasty.
Gloria sat beside her on the bench.
‘This is tasty’ Emilia noted, before glancing up at Gloria. ‘Nothing for you?’
‘Nah, I’m not in the mood for anything.’
‘You should eat regularly’ Emilia told her in a teasing voice. ‘It’s not good for you to skip meals.’
‘You’re one to talk’ Gloria retorted; her expression amused. ‘You should worry about yourself more.’
‘You’re probably right.’
Emilia continued to munch on her sandwich. The two sat in silence for a time, Gloria watching the gardens around them while Emilia finished her tuna.
When she did, she let out a heavy sigh, feeling content.
‘That’s better.’
Gloria smiled at her.
‘Thanks’ Emilia said.
‘No worries.’
Emilia paused for a moment, before glancing away.

‘What’s up?’ Gloria asked her.
‘I was just thinking, you don’t mind doing gymnastics with me, do you?’
‘Of course not. Why? Are you not enjoying it?’
‘It’s not that’ Emilia frowned. ‘I was just wondering. I’ve done gymnastics before, I’m not very good though’ she trailed off, speaking now as if to herself. ‘I did it a lot when I was young…anyway. I would love to do kickboxing, but um…. I can’t compete professionally anymore…even if this school offered kickboxing lessons.’
‘Why is that?’ Gloria asked.
‘I uh…. was told it’s something to do with…. what was it again…? It’s unfair to the competition, the fact I have a false leg I mean.’ She paused. ‘Or was it something about poor balance…?’ she added as an afterthought. ‘It’s not important.’
‘Oh, that’s a shame. I’m really sorry to hear that. You must miss it.’
‘I do’ Emilia smiled, perking up now. ‘I have wonderful memories of kickboxing class. Such wonderful friends, especially this one girl who was built like a tank. She kicked my ass every single time I faced off against her. I admired her so much, and wanted to be strong like her, I so badly wanted to win a fight against her one day, but I never got the chance.’
‘Is that because you….’ Gloria glanced down at Emilia then, ‘…you know.’
‘Lost my leg? Yes, sadly. It was never the same after that, it took me months to recover and by the time I was able to leave the hospital, the girl in my kickboxing class was gone.’
‘Gone?’ Gloria echoed nervously.
‘She didn’t die or anything’ Emilia chuckled, waving her away. ‘No, as far as I understand, her father got a new job and her family had to move away or something.’ Emilia paused, swallowing then, eyes becoming distant. ‘I felt really sad that we could not fight again. I think of her from time to time, even now. I wonder how she’s doing. Does she have a partner, is she married? Does she have any children, what is she doing for work?’
Gloria watched her silently for a few moments before speaking.
‘Was she older than you then?’
‘Only by a few years. She excelled in school because she was academically brilliant. She was always better than me at literally everything, chess…. maths…. even poetry, which I love so much.’
‘We all have someone we look up to’ Gloria smiled.
‘Well… yeah, I guess that’s right.’ Emilia paused. ‘I wonder who *she* looked up to.’
‘What was her name?’ Gloria asked.
‘Noah.’
‘Noah?’
Emilia chuckled lightly as she began to reminisce. ‘Yeah. That was her nickname anyway. She was also an incredible magician. I remember we went swimming together once, the whole class. She was in the shallow part of the pool when she called us over. She parted the water like Noah. It was amazing. I knew it was a trick, there were other tricks she did too, but that one was the most impressive. I never figured out how she did it. And of course, a magician would never reveal their secrets. I’m glad at least that I finally found out why she had that nickname. I never knew what her official name was. I think she said something like that it was too old-fashioned and didn’t suit her. It was her grandmother’s name…. or something.’
‘You want to hear something weird?’ Gloria offered. ‘The nurses made a mistake before I was born. They thought I would be a boy. My name was supposed to be Brian. Ha ha, thank God I was born a girl, I don’t like that name at all.’ Gloria shook her head, scrunching her nose.

‘So where *did* you get your name from?’ Emilia asked. ‘I mean… why was that name chosen?’
Gloria shifted uncomfortably now, looking away.
‘Well….’ she began reluctantly. ‘The doctor actually named me, I know it sounds kinda bad towards my parents but…she was a friend of the family, and my parents hadn’t thought of any girl names because they thought I would be a boy. So, the doctor suggested Gloria, and my parents both liked it.’
‘Why did the doctor choose Gloria? Do you know?’
She laughed then. ‘Yeah. I did ask some years later when I became aware of all of this. Let me see if I can remember.’ Gloria pursed her lips then, frowning at the ground as she gathered the thoughts to her.
‘Yes,’ she said at last. ‘I was named after someone called Gloria Pall, who was born in the 1920’s. During the war she worked as an aircraft mechanic. Then later became a model, then an actress, and in her later years an author. I think my parents were hoping that I will be as successful as her someday’ Gloria finished with an awkward laugh.
‘You have every chance to be as successful as her someday, even to surpass her’ Emilia replied, staring down at her phone now. ‘Oh wow, she’s really pretty. It says here that she frequently dressed in shades of purple……she was married twice, had one son……she died of heart failure at the age of 85…oh…. I’d love to die of heart failure at 85 years old.’
‘You say the strangest things sometimes’ Gloria said, leaning towards Emilia, looking over at the screen of her phone at the pictures. ‘Oh yeah, she is pretty. I love that hairstyle. Maybe I should try that style out. I love the hairstyles back in those days. It would be cool if it came back in fashion again.’
‘Maybe it can start with you.’
‘Oh, I don’t know’ Gloria squeaked excitedly, holding her cheeks with both hands and blushing slightly. ‘It would be such a big change, and I don’t know if it would suit me.’
‘I still think you should try it out. You might love it; it could be a new look for you. Remember, you miss 100% of the shots you don’t take…Wayne Gretzky…’
‘Are you quoting people again?’
‘Yup’ Emilia replied smugly.
‘Ok, so who is Wayne Gretzky?’
‘A Canadian ice hockey player’ Emilia replied simply.
‘You know so many random facts’ Gloria sighed.
‘And useless ones too. Did you know that the colour you see when you open your eyes in a pitch-black room is called ‘eigengrau,’ or how about the fact that cats can’t taste sweet things because of a genetic defect? Oh! How about the face that your fingernails grow faster on your dominant hand? Or that a ‘jiffy,’ is about one trillionth of a second. Apple seeds contain cyanide. And crabs walk straight forwards when they’re drunk……. ok…that last one was a joke.’
Gloria only shook her head at that. ‘I’ve really never met anyone like you.’
‘That could be both a compliment and an insult…which is why I like it so much…statements like that are open to interpretation.’
Gloria could only shake her head again.
‘Anyway…’ Emilia went on, ‘I wanted to mention something earlier…I kinda got side-tracked though…’
‘Ok?’
‘I wanted to ask you about the activities in this school’ Emilia began.

‘Go on.’
‘Well,’ Emilia furrowed her brow. ‘How difficult is it to create a new club?’
‘New club?’
‘Maybe that’s the wrong word. I mean like an activity. Like gymnastics. This school even has horse-riding. I’m sure its wouldn’t be so hard.’
‘Maybe not’ Gloria pondered, staring at the sky. ‘What did you have in mind?’
Emilia raised her head slowly, pausing for a moment before speaking.
‘Fencing.’
‘Fencing?’ Gloria echoed. ‘Why fencing?’
‘Why not?’
‘Well,’ Gloria glanced away, scratching her head, uncertain of how to proceed. ‘What made you choose fencing over other…um…other activities?’
‘Well, I’ve been considering several different options for a while now.’
‘You have?’ Gloria smiled. ‘You never said anything about it before.’
‘I didn’t want to bring it up without having an idea that was fully formed.’
‘What are you talking about?’ Gloria raised an eyebrow sceptically. ‘We could have discussed it together.’
Emilia just shrugged wordlessly.
‘Anyway’ Gloria said, elbowing her playfully in the side, ‘stop stalling. Hurry up and tell me. Why fencing?’
‘I saw it on TV some years ago, and something about it stuck in my mind. I love the look of the costumes, and the swords. It’s so graceful and elegant. It’s how I imagine swans would fight.’
‘Fighting swans’ Gloria mimicked. ‘I’ve never seen such a thing.’
‘Fencing is said to increase focus and concentration, as well as the powers of observation. It also helps to develop your discipline.’
‘Oh really.’
‘I believe learning such skills can improve one’s performance in many other aspects of their life too’, Emilia added.
‘I don’t doubt. So, you want to learn fencing.’
‘Yes. But I don’t know how to go about it. Perhaps…perhaps…’ Emilia trailed off.
‘Perhaps we can speak to the headmistress?’ Gloria suggested sweetly.
‘Yes’ Emilia mumbled, but her tone of voice suggested that she was only partly listening.
‘You’re not busy right now, are you?’ Gloria said. ‘You don’t have any plans? No classes for a while?’
Emilia smiled at that, glancing to her, sensing her intention.
‘Let’s go speak to Anna’ Emilia smiled.

‘So, you want to start a fencing club’ the headmistress said, leaning back in her chair.
‘Yup’ Emilia grinned, waving happily at her. ‘You got it.’
‘You’re not happy with the activities already provided by the school?’
‘It’s not that’ Emilia replied. ‘It’s just I think there could be more. I found a gap in the market. And I wish to fill it.’

You always told me I was useless and could never make a change Emilia thought to herself, watching Anna with a smile. *I will prove you wrong mother. Your words never hurt me, no matter how hard you tried to put me down.*
Anna seemed pleased at Emilia's response, leaning forwards.
'Are you serious about this?' Anna asked her.
'Of course,' Emilia replied. Beside her Gloria waited quietly.
'Hm.' Anna nodded. 'How many members do you have?'
'Members?' Emilia echoed.
Gloria glanced towards her uncertainly now.
'Yes. How many people are interested in fencing and wish to start a club?' Anna asked.
'Well,' Emilia glanced towards Gloria slowly. 'Actually…'
'The truth is we don't really have any members or anything like that' Gloria finished. 'We don't have um…'
'We just came up with the idea today' Emilia said. 'It's not fleshed out or anything.'
'It will take some work to get started' Anna said. 'The lessons need to be fitted into the current schedule, equipment needs to be paid for, but most importantly people need to be interested.'
Emilia nodded continuously as she listened to the headmistress's words.
'Do you have any experience in fencing?' Anna asked.
Emilia's heart sank a little.
'Uh, no.'
Anna frowned at that.
'That shouldn't matter though' Emilia spoke up hastily. 'We all learn from scratch, right?'
'But who's going to teach the lessons?' Anna asked. 'Have you had *any* fencing lessons before?'
'Uh….no' Emilia admitted.
Beside her Gloria shook her head mutely, agreeing with this statement.
Anna sighed, shoulders slumping.
'I can't be on board with this unless there is more preparation. It wouldn't be worth the time and money it would cost to pursue such a thing. I'm sorry girls, but unless there's anything else you need from me, you need to get going. I have work to do.'
'Oh no, that's everything' Emilia said, showing no sigh of her disappointment. 'Thank you for your time.'
She grabbed Gloria's hand awkwardly then and hurried out the room.
'I'm sorry Emilia' Gloria said to her, a few moments later when they were walking away from the office side by side.
'For what?'
'For um….um….'
Emilia stopped then, turning to face Gloria fully.
'I'm disappointed in you Gloria.'
'Hu?'
'You're not willing to accept defeat so easily, are you?'
Gloria stared at Emilia, mouth half open for a few moments, before composing herself.
'Of course not. Why would you even think that?'
Emilia began to giggle to herself then, positively shivering with excitement.
'I feel like we have some work to do …'

Chapter 15

'…so, you were upset because of yesterday?' Gracie said.
Becca nodded, giving a little cough.
Gracie took her jacket off, draping it around Becca's shoulders.
'N-no really I'm…'
But Gracie cut off her protests. 'You need to stay warm if you want to get better. I keep telling you to stop going out with not enough clothes on.'
Becca blushed slightly. 'You….don't have to say it like that…'
'Anyway…' Gracie continued, 'I was feeling nervous during my first event too.'
'You did?' Becca's eyes grew large at this.
'Yeah' Gracie smiled, closing her eyes as she began to reminisce. 'I had a terrible score…'
'Did you ever think about quitting?' Becca asked.
'Well…yes I did. Sometimes I still think about quitting. But I've felt so bad before on other occasions, and I'm sure I'll go through them again…' Gracie glanced away briefly, before looking back at Becca. 'I had so much fun and good times despite that.'
'Gracie….'
'We should go back to the hall soon' Gracie interrupted. 'We don't want to keep the other's waiting.'
Becca dipped her head a little, speaking quietly. 'I'm sorry I didn't congratulate you yesterday.'
'But you did.'
She looked up again, surprised.
'Forget it' Gracie smiled, looking away quickly.
'I'm sorry I couldn't be more helpful to you.'
'Oh Becca…' Gracie placed a hand over her heart then. 'You help me more than you know.'
Becca's eyes shimmered at that, and she dipped her head again, trying to hide her awkward smile.
'Don't…judge me ok…?'
'About what?'
'Well…' Becca shifted uncomfortably.
'Go on. You can tell me.'
'Can I…. sleep with you tonight?'
'Of course you can.'
Becca blinked in shock.
'Really?'
'Yes' Gracie replied. 'You sound surprised.'
'Well…I didn't think you would actually say yes.'
Gracie reached out to Becca, pulling her gently into a soft hug.
'You're like a sister to me…I'm not going to judge you for getting scared…I understand you've been alone.'
Becca wiped the tears from her eyes furiously, trying to do so quickly so that Gracie would not notice. But of course she did.

Becca could never hide her feelings from Gracie.
'If I let you sleep with me, you're not allowed to cry, ok?' Gracie pulled a handkerchief from the pocket of her dress, dabbing at Becca's eyes. 'I don't want you crying all over my bed.'
'Ok' Becca mumbled.
'Now give me a smile.'
Becca swallowed, pausing for a moment before looking back up at Gracie, smiling widely.
'You're so much prettier when you smile.'
'You are too' Becca said.
Gracie gently took Becca's hand in her own.
'You know' Gracie said, 'it's said that when people hold hands when they sleep, that they share the same dreams.'
'Where did you hear that?' Becca asked.
'My mother used to tell me' Gracie replied, brushing Becca's cheek with the back of her hand, 'oh so long ago….'
'She sounds like a really nice lady. I wish I could have met her.'
'You still can' Gracie winked. 'You know, I've already told her about you.'
'You have? But…it's too soon. I'm not ready…'
'Don't be scared' Gracie soothed. 'The world isn't going to hurt you. Not with me by your side.'
'Ah…'
'What's wrong?'
'I hate it when you get all cushy like that' Becca laughed awkwardly.
'I don't know what you mean' Gracie turned away sharply then, feigning annoyance.
'You know, you never act this way around anyone else' Becca continued, staring at her own lap, and fiddling with the skirt of her dress. 'I feel like I've exposed the more sensitive side of you…and I don't know if that's a good thing.'
Gracie said nothing.
Becca glanced up then, letting out a slight gasp.
Both she and Gracie stared silently at the figure that stared back at them from a few feet away.
Gracie immediately sneered with annoyance.
'What do you want? We're having a private conversation.'
'Oh no, Gracie don't me mean…we should ask what she wants first.'
'I just did.'
The new figure spoke.
'Join our fencing club.'
Gracie raised an eyebrow. 'What?'
'Maddy! There you are! Gloria! I found her!'
Emilia hurried up to Maddy, smiling apological to the two girls she had interrupted.
'I'm so sorry' Emilia flustered.
'Oh, hold on a sec' Gracie said, staring at Maddy 'I know you. You're that genius-girl.'
Emilia chuckled awkwardly, straightening up and holding her hands behind her back.
Maddy made no reaction, instead continued to stare at Gracie with a blank expression.
'She's trying her best' Emilia explained.
'You're not very good at talking to people, are you?' Gracie said to Maddy.
'Gracie!' Becca voiced. 'That wasn't very nice, you shouldn't be so mean.'
'I wasn't being mean' Gracie quickly replied. 'I was just telling the truth.'

Gloria had reached them then, finally having identified the location of Emilia's calling.
'I'm sorry' Gloria said hastened. 'I hope we didn't bother you.'
'It's ok' Becca smiled back to her. 'You weren't bothering us.'
Gracie frowned but she said nothing.
Emilia, Gloria, and the stiff and staring Maddy, stood over Becca and Gracie.
'We just wanted to invite you to join the new club we're trying to start' Gloria offered, taking the paper from Maddy, who still held it extended, and handing it to the two girls.
Becca took it gratefully, thanking all three of the girls.
'We should get going now' Emilia smiled to Gracie and Becca. 'Again, sorry to bother you.'
Emilia put her hands in the centre of Gloria's back, gently encouraging her away.
'Come along Madison' Emilia sang back. 'Let's leave them alone now.'
Maddy shrugged, following after Emilia and Gloria.

'Did I do something wrong?' Maddy asked when the three of them were alone together.
Emilia groaned loudly, slumping back against the wall behind her.
By pure accident she had positioned herself the fit perfectly in the centre of the great wings that had been painted upon the wall. Another one of the beautiful depictions created by 'Gone Girl.'
'Not at all' Gloria said. 'You did a wonderful job. Maybe…. you shouldn't wander off like that next time.'
'Right' Maddy answered curtly, giving a single nod. 'I will remember that.'
She glanced to her watch then.
'I'm leaving now anyway. I've already cut into my study-time.'
She walked away without another word, Gloria calling after her.
'Thank you for your help! See you next time!'
Maddy made no indication that she had heard. Moments later she was out of sight.
'I honestly didn't think we would ever get her onboard' Emilia mumbled.
Gloria turned to her, taking in the fabulous painting on the wall behind Emilia. The sweeping pink petals painted all around, the light from the sun that shone behind the wings, creating a gold outline.
'I wonder why she agreed to help us' Gloria replied, speaking in a distant voice.
'Whatever the reason, I'm thankful for it. Even though she's challenging at times.'
'She's trying her best' Gloria smiled. 'Didn't you say that yourself?'
Emilia smirked, pushing herself off the wall.
'So how are we doing?'
'Pretty good' Gloria replied. 'I'm feeling really confident about this. We got a few people on board, but we still need a lot more. We don't have enough members yet to approached the headmistress again.'
'Hmmmm' Emilia mused. 'That's ok though,' she seemed to be speaking more to the air than to Gloria. 'I think we're doing really well. We're definitely on the right path. I'm excited about this new club. And Gloria?' she said, meeting her eyes now with a warm expression.
'Yes?'
'I couldn't have done this without you' Emilia told her. 'I really appreciate your help.'
'It's no problem at all. It's been fun. I can't wait to defeat you in fencing.'
'Ha! You wish.'

‘At this point, you are as much of an expert as I am’ Gloria smiled sweetly, leaning forwards with her hands behind her back. ‘We don’t know which of us is better. It could be either one of us at this point.’
‘If that’s a challenge, you’re on! I won’t let myself be beaten by you.’
Gloria giggled behind her hand, positively shivering with the thrill of the challenge. ‘We need the club first. But yes, that *was* a challenge, and I can’t wait to fight with you.’

Weeks pass

Anna was just exiting her office. She closed the door. As she was just turning around, she saw the figures of Gloria and Emilia hurrying up to her, whispering to each other excitedly.
They stopped before her, playfully hushing each other before falling silent.
‘This is for you’ Emilia said, handing the headmistress a piece of paper.
Anna took the paper, eye scrolling down the page.
‘There are seventy-eight names on that page’ Emilia said proudly as Anna continued to take in the information on the paper. ‘That’s about 9% of the school’s population. That’s more than enough to qualify as a club.’
Anna dipped her head, a slight smile tweaking at the edge of her lips.
‘I see’ was all she said. ‘Leave this with me. I’ll get back to you.’

A few more weeks passed.

‘…the highest score at the end of time, wins. Sounds easy right? Not quite. It’s a little more complicated than that. Olympic Fencing has three different disciplines which are fought with three different weapons, and each have uniquely different rules from each other.’ Andrea glanced across the hall, looking towards the other fighters who were already facing off against each other. His attention lingered on them for a moment, before looking back at the beginner class before him. ‘The first discipline is called *the foil*, and is the most common. It is considered to be the most technical. The foil is the smallest and lightest of the three weapons, and the target area is anywhere on the torso or back. In foil, you are only allowed to attack an opponent by thrusting with the tip of your blade. Hitting with the side of the sword, doesn’t count.’
Andrea continued with his explanation as the girls before him listened silently.

One of the duelling pairs within the hall, suddenly ended their sparring. Emilia turned away quickly, admitting defeat.
Gloria took her mask off, smiling triumphantly.
‘Another win to me!’ she declared.
‘How…’ Emilia sobbed dramatically into her arm. ‘Why do I keep failing?’
Gloria straightened, holding the sabre behind her delicately.
‘You need quick reflexed to even watch fencing’ Gloria said to her, ‘let alone play it yourself, if you want to truly understand it.’

‘Did Andrea tell you that?’ Emilia grumbled, having taken off her false leg, hugging it now for comfort.
‘He did. He’s a wonderful teacher. I wasn’t expecting a male teacher. And he’s so young.’
‘Yeah’ Emilia sighed, fixing her leg back in place. ‘He’s the son of one of the headmistresses’ closest friends. She trusts him greatly, not just because of who he is, but because he’s gay.’
‘What?’ Gloria laughed.
‘Yeah. He’s engaged to a handsome young man called Sebastian.’
‘How do you know?’
‘I met him briefly a few days back. Nice guy. If I wasn’t a lesbian, maybe I’d be interested.’
‘What was that last part?’ Gloria asked. ‘You were mumbling.’
‘Nothing at all’ Emilia waved away. ‘Don’t worry about it. And anyway, you should never become involved with a married person, not like that anyway. You might get murdered.’
‘I think you’ve been watching too much true crime lately’ Gloria sighed.
‘Hey, I only watched seven, and they were interesting.’
‘Anyway’ Gloria continued. ‘We should get going. Class will be soon.’
‘Yeah’ Emilia grinned. ‘And you need to fix your hair a little, I’m afraid the helmet doesn’t do your hair any favours.’
‘It doesn’t look awful, does it?’ Gloria said, panicked now.
‘Not at all, you look beautiful even with scruffy hair.’
‘Stop’ Gloria scolded, cheeks flushed now. ‘I hate it when you tease me like that.’
Emilia considered her friend, tilting her head as she observed her. ‘I do like your new hairstyle. I’m glad you tried it out. The old-fashioned look really suits you.’
‘Thanks.’
They walked away together, taking off their fencing uniform and putting them neatly away in their place.
One of the unused store-rooms nearby now held all the fencing equipment. Emilia and Gloria had cleaned out the dusty room themselves. Now it was clean and the new equipment was stored orderly. It made Emilia feel very proud.
She and Gloria headed to their next class together.
Dear mother in hell. I’ve learned today, that I’m not as good at fencing as I hoped I would be. But that only drives me to better myself. I need to defeat my opponent in war and claim my victory over her reign. I will hone my skills…and topple her crown…

Chapter 16

It was many weeks later, and Emilia still had not managed to win against Gloria.
‘I *will* defeat you’ Emilia swore aloud. ‘As God is my witness!’
‘There’s no need to be so serious.’ Gloria told her. ‘And no need to shout.’
‘It’s not right’ Emilia answered firmly, making a flourishing motion with her hand. ‘You’re not supposed to be better than me at anything.’

‘Says who?’ Gloria countered.
‘Prepare to die!’ Emilia cried out dramatically, taking a step back, her posture ready to strike. ‘I’m as swift as a cobra, with steely focus and determination.’ Her posture immediately relaxed upon saying this, as she noticed a large creature trotting toward them.
They were outside now. It was a beautiful day, and so they had decided to practice their fencing lessons in the sun.
The area they were practicing was right beside the field where the horses jumped. Shannon was taking part in a riding lesson, along with a few others. The lessons were small in size due to the limited number of horses, and took place every other day to give the horses rest.
Emilia turned to the little fence that went around the field, watching as Shannon approached on a pretty palomino mare. Gloria moved closer to the white-painted fence, leaning on it and smiling happily up at Shannon. Emilia stayed where she was, maintaining the distance between herself and the horse.
‘Hey guys’ Shannon smiled, ‘how are you doing?’
‘Great’ Gloria replied. ‘Enjoying the sun like you.’
‘It’s gorgeous, isn’t it?’ Shannon beamed, looking over Gloria’s head and towards Emilia. ‘Hey Emilia, how are you?’
‘I’m fine!’ Emilia waved at Shannon merrily.
‘Still afraid of Rainbow-Sparkle?’ Shannon laughed, patting the horse’s neck.
‘Terrified’ Emilia replied stoically.
‘I’m sure you’d come to love her if you give her a chance’ Shannon told her. ‘She is such a sweet girl.’
‘No way. Not a chance’ Emilia said, folding her arms stubbornly and turning her head away.
Shannon could only shake her head in amusement and exasperation.
Shannon and Gloria began to talk for a short time, moments later, Emilia made a start.
‘Oh my…what time is it? I have to go…’
‘Oh no’ Gloria realised. ‘Did you nearly forget about your shift?’
‘Ah…I’m sorry, could you put my stuff away please?’ Emilia fumbled, dropping her things and hastily taking her gear off. ‘I gotta hurry or I’m gonna be late.’
Emilia had been granted special permission by the headmistress to leave the school grounds at certain times to attend her new job.
As Emilia turned to hurry away, Gloria called out to stop her.
‘Hey! You better not go without eating something!’
Emilia paused only briefly to snatch a low-hanging apple from one of the trees, turning playfully on the spot, she bit into the apple, winking at Gloria and waving at her, before skipping away.
Gloria sighed heavily as she watched Emilia go.
‘Honestly’ Gloria said to herself. ‘That girl is all over the place.’

It was later that day, during the evening that Emilia returned. She joined her friends at the table in the canteen, startling her friend Tulip as she slumped into her without warning.
‘Emilia! Don’t scare me like that!’
‘Ugh.’
Tulip was able to get a better look at her then.
‘Are you alright?’ she asked Emilia. ‘You look exhausted.’
‘I am…I’m exhausted…’

Dear mother in hell. I feel like a stone golem and that my bones are made of iron.
'Ok, that's getting really annoying now' Tulip told her. 'Can you stop leaning on me please?'
'No.'
Coleen looked up from her sandwich, considering Emilia.
'You'll feel better once you get something to eat' she told her.
'Yeah. I guess you're right.'
'So, you'll go get some food?' Coleen prompted.
'Nah.'
'If you don't get yourself something to eat' Coleen said, 'I'll get up and get you something myself.'
For some reason this sounded more like a threat, but Emilia knew it came from a place of concern. Coleen was only trying to look out for her.
'No!' Emilia snapped, rising to her feet quickly. 'I can get it myself. I'm not an in-valid.'
She rose too fast, quickly feeling light-headed, experiencing this sensation just long enough to regret it.
She collapsed, Tulip who was closest to her catching her as she fainted.
When Emilia next opened her eyes, she was in the nurse's office again.
Tulip and Coleen and Ella were standing beside her, all looking stern.
Emilia reacted pre-emptively.
'Ugh' she said, before rolling onto her side to face away from them.
'Don't give us that' Ella snapped at her. 'I'm pretty sure we're all getting tired of you not looking after yourself and fainting like this. We all had to help carry you. You're so tall…you know how awkward it is?'
'Don't make comments about my height' Emilia scowled, speaking to the wall. 'You know it makes me insecure.'
'Don't be dumb' Ella said. 'I know nothing makes you insecure. Now sit up and have something to eat, we brought you some food.'
'Don't boss me around' Emilia replied sullenly. 'You're not my mother. Uh…were did my leg go?'
'It fell off when we were carrying you' Tulip replied, lifting it up. 'Just as well really, it made it easier to carry you.'
'Hardly' Coleen scowled. 'Maybe for you. Ella and I carried the giraffe.'
'Yeah' Ella huffed, 'next time, you can carry her yourself.'
'As if. Hey Emilia' Tulip said to her. 'Want your leg back?'
Emilia rolled over the other way, taking her leg back from Tulip.
'Thanks' she said awkwardly.
She looked around.
'Where is my food?' Emilia asked.
'Gloria is just bringing it now.'
Emilia turned to stare longingly towards the door, eyes wide and desperate.
'I thought you said you brought it already' Emilia uttered.
'Just hold on a second' Tulip frowned.
Emilia continued to stare at the door. A few moments later, it opened.
Emilia's eyes widened, her expression lighting up with excitement and anticipation.
'Food!'
'Well hello to you too' Gloria said. 'I heard you overdid it again.'

‘Me? Never.’
Gloria had no sooner placed the items she carried on the nearby table, a sandwich and a carton of juice, that Emilia snatched them up.
‘Oh, you got me a tuna sandwich’ Emilia exclaimed.
‘You do like tuna’ Gloria said uncertainly. ‘Right?’
‘Sure.’
Emilia then proceeded to open her sandwich, picking out the pieces of sweetcorn and putting them to one side.’
The others observed her, each with a certain level of distain as they watched her alter her food. They refrained from saying anything however, simply glad that she was finally eating.

As soon as Emilia felt strong enough, she left the nurses office. Gloria walked with her to their dorm room.
Gloria pushed Emilia onto her bed. Caught off-guard, Emilia fell forwards.
‘Now sleep’ Gloria ordered her roommate. ‘I don’t want you fainting again for at least another *week*.’
‘Yes…. *mother’* Emilia replied sarcastically.
Gloria ignored her, heading to her own bed.
‘I’m gonna study a bit, you sit there and be quiet. Can you do that?’
‘Sure’ Emilia droned.
Gloria fell silent.
After a few moments, Emilia looked over towards Gloria. She sat on her bed with her back against the wall, legs folded, with a book open before her. Her attention was pointed downwards, and she paid Emilia no attention at all.
Emilia watched her for a time, before letting out a sigh, closing her eyes.
It seemed that she was more tired than she realised, for within what must have been less than a minute, she was fast asleep.

Emilia woke the next morning, feeling refreshed and full of energy.
She sat up, realising she had fallen asleep in her clothes.
‘Woah’ she muttered to herself, ‘I must have been super-tired.’
She looked over towards the other bed, seeing Gloria tucked under the sheets, fast asleep and comfortable.
Emilia smiled to herself fondly, thinking about how sweet Gloria looked when she was sleeping.
Emilia rose, stepping into the bathroom.
She washed quickly, getting into fresh clothes, and heading out. Before she left her dorm room, she paused, looking over towards Gloria’s sleeping figure again, and smiling affectionately to herself, before making her way.

Emilia marched outside. The morning air had a chill, but it was not unpleasant. She walked across the grounds to the gymnasium, doing so with a spring in her step.
She entered one of the large halls, moving over to one of the storage rooms, foraging loudly for her equipment.

She paused, hearing faint sounds.
Emilia stepped back out of the cupboard, holding her fencing gear in her hands now.
She saw a figure in the distance, standing on the other side of the hall.
She recognised the figure first from her hair. It was light green.
'Oh. Hey Shannon.'
Shannon smiled, still not turning. Though her eyes met with Emilia's in the reflection of the mirror she danced in front of.
'Emilia' Shannon returned, lowering her arms and finally turning to face her. 'You're up early.'
'So are you' Emilia replied.
Shannon smiled again.
'You're practicing some fencing?' Shannon queried, tilting her head, and indicating the things that Emilia carried.
'Yeah' Emilia smiled, feeling a little sheepish, though she didn't know why. 'I'm still getting used to it. It's a lot of fun but…I need to be a lot better.'
'You want to get better than Gloria don't you.'
'Please don't tell her I'm here' Emilia groaned, expression dampening and eyes suddenly pleading. 'I don't want her to know I've been practicing in secret.'
Shannon giggled behind her hand. 'Don't worry. I won't tell her. I promise.'
'Cool.'
Emilia turned on her heel, waving merrily back to Shannon.
'See you around.'
Emilia quickly marched away, and Shannon turned back to the mirror before her, studying her form, fighting to reach perfection.
She reached her hands above her again, stretching towards the ceiling.
She continued to dance.

Emilia met Gloria later that day, during lunchbreak.
'There you are' Gloria said. 'You left early this morning.'
Emilia said nothing, she simply continued to smile, beaming back at Gloria mutely.
Gloria instantly became suspicious.
'What are you hiding?' Gloria asked, eyes narrowing.
'Nothing!' Emilia replied. 'Nothing at all.'

Chapter 17

Many more weeks passed, and Emilia continued with her life as usual. Her lessons continued as they had been, she continued to be bested at fencing by Gloria, and continued her terrible habit of collapsing every so often due to not eating properly.
Yup, things were just as they should be.

One day, Emilia was leaning again one of the walls, her foot propped up against the wall behind her, arms folded. Painted on the brick behind her, were another one of 'Gone Girls' paintings. Wings unfurled, with light breaching through the clouds in the background.
She glanced around, humming to herself, before looking ahead again.
'Oh, hey Maddy.'
Maddy stopped what she was doing, not that Emilia knew what that was.
Maddy turned to face Emilia, still wearing her usual blank expression. She had simply been walking across Emilia's field of vision, only a short distance away. Her destination unknown to Emilia.
'What are you doing?' Maddy asked her.
'Oh, me?'
Maddy stared at Emilia, waiting for an answer.
'Ah' Emilia said, catching herself, suddenly realising that Maddy was waiting for an answer.
'Nothing in particular' Emilia grinned, looking away again. 'I'm just waiting for Sarah.'
'Sarah? I thought you hated her.'
'I don't hate her' Emilia replied indignantly. 'I mean…we've had some disagreements but…'
But Maddy had already lost interest, walking away suddenly without another word.
Emilia's voice trailed away as Maddy sauntered off.
'…um…ok?'
Emilia turned away, seeing the person she was waiting for standing in the distance, talking to her friends.
'Sarah!'
Sarah looked around.
'Emilia? What is it?' came her distant voice.
Emilia beaconed her over.
Sarah hesitated, her two friends either side of her stared towards her with clear suspicion in their eyes.
Sarah came over. Her friends stayed behind.
'What do you want?' Sarah asked Emilia.
'This is gonna come out really weird so I'm just gonna say it and I want you to seriously accept ok?'
Sarah raised an eyebrow.
'Um, ok? This better not be a prank.'
Emilia fumbled. 'No no…. I-I would never…well…I would but…a-anyway.'
Emilia shook herself.
'Here.'
She reached into the bag she had previously been hiding behind her, pulling out a…
'Look' Emilia gleamed.
'Is that a massive wad of cash?'
'I've been working for weeks saving money. I wanted to give you this' Emilia extended her hand, holding the money in its envelope.
'What?' Sarah said incredulous.
'I've been working all this time…for you….' Emilia explained. 'You want to leave this place, don't you? Get away and start a new life with you boyfriend? Get married?'

Sarah blinked; eyes wide in disbelief.
'I don't understand.'
'Well its quite simple' Emilia declared, taking Sarah's hand, and placing the envelope in her palm. 'Take this money. Get away from here, and live the life you want.'
'How much is in here?'
'At least a thousand' Emilia replied.
'I…you're *giving* this to me?'
'Yes.' Emilia answered firmly. 'Maybe…um.'
Sarah glanced towards her two friends, who were watching closely from where they stood.
Sarah looked back at Emilia.
'Let's go somewhere a little more private' Sarah suggested.
She and Emilia went away together, to a quieter, more out-of-sight spot to speak alone.

A time later, Sarah met with her friends again.
'Come on' she said to them. 'Let's go.'
'What happened?' they both asked. 'What did she want?'
'I'll tell you later' Sarah replied.
She paused one last time to glance back at Emilia, who waved at her merrily, staying where she was.
Tears shimmered in Sarah's eyes, as she turned away.
The group of three left the scene.
Emilia watched them go, feeling in her heart that she had done the right thing. And she felt happy.
Dear mother in hell, despite your cruelty, I never became an angry and hateful person like you were. You were a perfect example to me. You were everything I strived not *to be. And I thank you every day for the lessons you taught me, even though you didn't mean to. I learned a lot from you…*
'What the hell was that?'
'Gloria?' Emilia wheeled around. 'The fuck are you doing here? I mean…hey… don't sneak up on me.'
Gloria gave her a peculiar expression.
'I saw you give something to Sarah. What was all that about?'
Emilia drew back slowly, hesitant now.
'Uh. Ah-ha-ha.'
Emilia twirled on the spot, swinging her hips and holding her hands behind her back, a mischievous grin plastered across her face.
'Could we forget you ever saw anything?' Emilia asked.
'Oh no way, I need to know what's going on. You're not keeping secrets from me. What did you give her.'
Emilia tutted, turning away and rolling her eyes.
'I gave her money, Gloria.'
'Money?'
'All of the money I made from my job.'
'But why?'

Emilia sighed.
'I just wanted to help her.'
Gloria made a funny face. She was more perplexed than she had been before.
'It's because of her boyfriend' Emilia went on.
'What do you mean?'
'I see how much the two of them are truly in love. My mother was always so cruel to me, constantly putting me down at every opportunity. Literally.' She spoke this last word with a groan, unable to stop herself from gritting her teeth. 'I wanted to do everything I could to help Sarah achieve her goal. I know she wanted to get out of this school, and escape this place with her boyfriend…. soon to be fiancé.' Emilia smiled. 'It inspired me. I want her to be happy. Because I know what it's like to be sad.' Emilia paused, mulling her thoughts over in her head. 'I wanted to do everything I can to try to help her, and so I worked.'
'That's…amazing.' Gloria said. 'That's…really sweet of you. I…never thought…'
'Kill them with kindness' Emilia said.
'What?'
'Don't worry' Emilia dismissed.
'You worked so hard for so long' Gloria mumbled, 'all those times you collapsed with exhaustion…'
'It's ok' Emilia said. 'I've quit that job now. I can fully focus on my studies…and finally maybe I can improve my abilities and defeat you.'
'You mean in fencing?' Gloria asked.
'Yeah…fencing…and in general.'
'Oh yeah?' Gloria snickered.
She lifted her hand for Emilia to take.
'Arm-wrestle?' Gloria suggested, when Emilia continued to look confused. 'I bet I'll win.'
'Yeah, as if' Emilia scoffed, reaching out to grasp Gloria's hand tightly.
Gloria did in fact win. But only by cheating. When she saw she was about to lose, Gloria knocked Emilia's false leg off, sending her tumbling to the floor with a shove as Emilia was unable to maintain her balance.
'Hey no fair!' Emilia protested from the floor.
'Relax' Gloria shrugged. 'Come on, I'll help you up. For realsies this time.'
Emilia frowned at her suspiciously, reaching out to take her hand for the second time.
And true to her word, Gloria helped her up, even bringing her leg back to her and allowing Emilia to use her as support while she fixed it back on.
'I'm only teasing you because we're such good friends' Gloria said, as Emilia straightened up. 'You know that right?'
'Yeah' Emilia said, dusting herself off. 'I do.'
Gloria turned away. 'Come on. We've got class together now. We should go.'
Emilia walks beside her friend, glancing over to her with a smile, before looking ahead again.
Dear mother in hell. I hope its toasty down there.
She smirked to herself.
No matter what you did to me, I never stopped being kind to others, even after your death. I have always been kind, and will continue to do so…no matter what…

It was the very next day, that Sarah was gone.
Her friends remained, but Sarah would never be seen again at this school.
Emilia hoped she got the ending she deserved, though of course, it wasn't really the ending, only the beginning.
'She's out there somewhere' Emilia uttered, sitting on the windowsill of her dorm-room, 'living her life…hopefully happy…'
'What was that?' Gloria spoke up from the other side of the room.
Emilia snapped back to herself. 'Oh! It was nothing.' Emilia dipped her head again, looking back to the book on her lap. 'I was just thinking aloud.'

Chapter 18

Emilia and Shannon were resting at the edge of the field, while Ella and Tulip played nearby. There were four of them in their friend group now. The others were at class. As usual, their classes over the week were patchy, with regular breaks to prevent fatigue. Everyone had a different schedule, to prevent crowding in certain areas at certain times. Like the canteen for example. The students were typically arranged into three grounds, A, B and C. And each had a different timetable. It was a system that worked very well.

Tulip raised the leg, holding the ankle with both hands.
'Ready?' came Ella's voice from across the field.
'Hit me' Tulip called back, lifting the false leg in preparation.
Ella sent the ball hurtling forwards, and Tulip struck it with the 'bat', sending it flying through the air.
'Nice shot' Ella called.
A short distance away, Emilia and Shannon watched casually, sitting on the edges of the field upon the gentle slope.
'…it was an overdose' Emilia was saying, 'shortly after I lost my leg. Supposedly she did it by accident, and not on purpse. Though I think it was something in between. I don't think she intended to die. I think she was doing it for attention, but took too much. So, it was kinda her fault because she was trying to garner sympathy. She's pulled this sort of thing more than once. So yeah, she died while I was at still in the hospital….she never came to visit me by the way, or check that I was ok. I don't think it was meant in any malicious way, not this time anyway. I think she just genuinely forgot about me.'
'I'm so sorry to hear that' Shannon replied.
'Don't be ridiculous' Emilia waved her away with a giggle, a genuine smile upon her face.
'So, what about your father?'

‘I never knew him’ Emilia shrugged carelessly. ‘First it was one guy, then another. My mother would basically lie about all of it. One day I just stopped asking. I decided it didn’t matter anymore who my father was, he wasn’t a part of my life anyway. And that’s when it stopped bothering me.’
‘Just like that?’ Shannon leant forwards.
‘Just like that.’ Emilia stretched out, reaching for the skies above and sighing deeply, before dropping her arms, letting them rest on the soft grass above her. ‘I learned very early on how to survive on my own, and I found happiness in that, in solitude.’
‘Didn’t you ever feel lonely?’
‘Well…yes…of course I did’ Emilia continued speaking to the clouds. ‘But I would rather be alone, than waste my time around toxic people, who either want to hurt you, or don’t care about you at all.’ She smiled, another genuine smile, eyes closed as the sunlight shone upon her skin. ‘I learned very early on to love myself, as I was. I didn’t need to change because of other people. I wouldn’t.’
‘That’s so wonderful to hear’ Shannon was saying. ‘I don’t think…uh…’
‘What is it?’ Emilia said, opening her eyes and turning to her friend. ‘Out with it.’
‘Well…it’s so awful’ Shannon spoke softly. ‘I don’t think I would be able to deal with anything like that.’
‘You’d be surprised how strong you are’ Emilia said, ‘when being strong is the only choice you have.’
Shannon turned towards her, seeing Emilia’s wide grin.
‘You’ve always been so happy’ Shannon said, ‘despite everything.’
‘I try’ Emilia replied in a sing-song voice.
Emilia let out a sigh, facing ahead again, towards the sky. She closed her eyes once more.
Dear mother in hell. Thank you for the lessons you’ve taught me.
‘Oh!’
Emilia sat up to see Tulip, holding her false leg, facing away and towards the grey and heavy rainclouds ominously approaching.
‘It’s about to rain guys’ Tulip continued. ‘We should head in.’
‘We should go to the library’ Ella called out.
Tulip ran back to grab her bag which rested beside Emilia, handing Emilia back her leg as she did.
Shannon rose, lifting her own bag and turning to help Emilia stand, after she had re-fitted her leg that is.
Ella led the way, as the other three girls hurried after her, raindrops began to patter.
By the time the four of them reached the building that housed the library, the rain was pelting down.
Ella held the door open for the rest of them as they ran into the foyer.
She released the door, abruptly cutting out the wind and rain.
‘Ahh’ Emilia sighed, brushing her hair back and wiping the rain from her brow. ‘That’s better. I wasn’t expecting such an abrupt squall.’
Emilia began to fuss about herself for a few moments, before glancing up and realising she was alone. The others had already moved forwards towards the library.
Emilia caught up to them quickly, as they were entering through the main doors.
It was silent here; the library was a place of peace and solace.

It was spacious, the floors, walls and ceiling all made of fine wood. On one side, the windows were large, reaching from hip-height, all the way to the high ceiling. The bookcases were many, lining the walls in every space that was clear from the windows. There were many bookcases in the open spaces also, between the tables and chairs. There was a small desk near the entrance, where the double-doors were left open and welcoming. At certain times of the day, the librarian would sit here. Now, her seat was empty.
The computers were at the far back, in another separate area, positioned in a way so that all the screens could be easily seen.
The four of them, Emilia, Shannon, Ella, and Tulip, entered the library quietly.
Emilia's eye rove all around the spacious area, admiring the pictures about them. Various paintings from well-known stories, a dead cat inside a box, Schrödinger's cat, various historical pictures from different ages, athletes in various sports. Each individual picture was its own conversation piece.
Emilia tilted her head towards her favourite painting in the room. The punishment of Prometheus, originally painted in the 17th century. The picture illustrated a man on his back, a great eagle pecking at his body. In Greek mythology, Prometheus was punished by Zeus for the crime of stealing fire. He was bound to a rock while an eagle ate his liver every day, only to have it grow back, and be eaten again. Every single day.
Emilia paused for the briefest moment, glancing back at the picture as she went by.
She loved this picture, the muted colours used, the expression of anguish on the man's face, the pose of the eagle.
'Beautiful' Emilia muttered to herself, as she went by.
The rain was hammering hard against the glass now, and Emilia looked out from the safety and warmth of where she stood, to the cold world outside.
When she turned away from the window, she noticed a familiar figure before her. It was Maddy.
'Hey Maddy.'
Maddy glanced towards her, though didn't react. She continued with what she was doing, which was stretching, it seemed, and maintaining a good posture.
'Oh' Emilia suddenly realised, 'you're practicing ballet.'
Maddy didn't respond.
'I guess it's not a good time to tend to your flowers now hu.'
Maddy placed both feet on the ground again, straightening up and lowering her arms.
Finally, she turned to speak to Emilia.
'It's raining outside. It makes the soil soft and easy to manipulate.'
'Then why aren't you out there?' Emilia asked cheerily, leaning against the radiator and rubbing against it.
Hmmm, so warm…
'It's cold rain' Maddy answered simply. 'If the rain was warm then I would still be out there.'
'Oh, I see' Emilia smiled.

Elsewhere, Shannon, Ella and Tulip had found an empty table to sit at. Empty, save for one person.
'Gloria' Shannon whispered, seeing her and moving over.
'Hey' Gloria smiled.
Shannon took the seat beside her, shuffling closer.

‘Are you doing homework?’ Shannon asked.
‘Yeah’ Gloria answered quietly back, putting her notes down and letting out a sigh. ‘I’m just tidying stuff up and trying to catch up.’
On the other side of the table sat Ella and Tulip.
Gloria grinned at them both. ‘Got caught in the rain hu?’
‘What gave it away?’ Ella shivered, running her hand over her wet hair.
Tulip glanced around, waving to Emilia and beaconing her over.
Maddy notices this as Emilia waved back.
‘I’m going to check the rain’ Maddy said, before walking away without another word.
Emilia watched Maddy as she walked away, before approaching the table and sitting down.
‘Hey Gloria, what’s that you have with you?’
‘Hm?’ Gloria looked down to her bags beneath the table. ‘Oh, that’s my fencing gear.’
‘Why do you have that with you?’ Emilia asked.
‘I accidentally brought it with me’ Gloria said. ‘I’ll take it back to the hall later.’
Emilia’s eyes went wide.
‘Uh, are you alright Emilia?’ Gloria asked.
‘I’ll be back’ Emilia said, before hurrying off.
Only a few minutes later, Emilia returned, soaking wet, and carrying something under her shirt.
‘What have you got there’ Ella asked.
‘Look.’ Emilia pulled out what she was hiding.
‘Your fencing gear’ Gloria said, seeing it.
Emilia dumped the sword, the jacket, the mask and gloves and everything else on the table in front of Gloria.
‘Fight me.’
‘What?’ Gloria started.
‘Fight me’ Emilia repeated. ‘Right here, right now.’
‘I don’t think this is the time or place’ Gloria replied uncertainly.
‘What better time than the present?’ Emilia smirked, straightening up and beginning to put the padding on. ‘You better hurry up’ Emilia warned. ‘If you don’t have your gear on by the time I finish putting mine on, I will fight you regardless.’
Gloria stared up at Emilia, eyes wide for a moment, before a smirk spread across her face.
‘You’re on.’
Gloria hurriedly donned her gear. Just in time for Emilia to make her first strike.
‘Hey I wasn’t ready’ Gloria protested.
Emilia only smirked, flicking the sword again and lunging forwards.
Gloria parried her attack, and the two began to spar.
Shannon, Ella and Tulip all moved out of the way, shuffling towards the other side of the table to safety.
‘Guys guys’ Shannon panicked, shrinking back. ‘You can’t do that…’
‘Be silent’ Emilia interrupted, speaking in a commanding voice, which boomed and echoed through the library. ‘I will defeat my foe, if it’s the last thing I do…’
Others within the library stopped what they were doing now, looking towards the source of the noise.
Emilia jumped onto the table, continuing to fight Gloria.
‘Hey, that’s not allowed’ Gloria said.
Emilia ignored her, continuing to strike.

Gloria glowered, leaping onto the table also, and continuing to fight.
Around them, people began to gather.
Ella and Tulip looked around nervously, realising this scene was becoming the centre of attention for all within the library.
But Emilia paid no heed, continuing to fight on the table for several moments, before turning and leaping on top of one of the book shelves.
'Seriously?' Gloria asked.
'Join me' Emilia declared dramatically, twirling her sword in the air in a fancy-fashion.
Gloria pursed her lips, hesitating for the briefest moment, before obliging.
They stood upon one of the bookshelves, facing off, swords raised.
'Here we go' Emilia whispered, lunging forwards and striking.
Gloria deflected.
'Ha ha!' Emilia cried out. 'The greatest glory in living, lies not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall.'
The two continued to spar.
People kept their distance, watching with confusion and hesitation.
'Is this really happening?' one girl asked.
Her friend just shrugged.
Emilia leapt to the top of another bookshelf, then another, and another. Gloria followed her, re-engaging in the fight.
Emilia and Gloria were moving so fast, and only very few within the library were able to keep up with the swift movements of the fighters.
The two of them froze suddenly, Gloria wearing an expression of shock on her face.
'What?' she gasped.
'Yes!' Emilia declared, eyes burning with excitement. 'I won!'
'What's going on here?!' came a new voice.
Everyone looked around, seeing a teacher striding into the library.
'Get off the bookshelves now!'
'Bye!' Gloria called, turning on her heel and running away.
She jumped off the bookshelf, bouncing down to the table, then to the floor, and proceeding to run as fast as she could. She fled deeper into the library, heading to the computer room at the back and jumping through the window, and to freedom.
Emilia who remained, stumbled back, looking her balance and tumbling.
She fell, but was caught in the arms of another.
She looked up to her rescuer, seeing Shannon holding her.
'H-hey' Emilia fumbled, blushing slightly.
Shannon looked up, dropping Emilia who abruptly fell to the floor.
Shannon fled, as Gloria had. And now that Emilia looked around, she noticed that Tulip and Ella were gone too.
The teacher came around the corner, glaring at Emilia.
'What on earth do you think you're doing, in the library? Explain yourself!'
She'd been caught, there was no way to save herself.
Emilia flopped back against the floor, sighing deeply, eyes closed with a smile upon her face.
Worth it….

Chapter 19

Emilia was of course punished for this tom-foolery. The headmistress Anna was furious, and gave her a really long lecture about this thing she had done. Honestly, Emilia had stopped listening after a time, though it was all the same sort of stuff you might expect.
This behaviour is unacceptable. What came over you. That was dangerous. I expected better of you.
So, after a very long time, Anna finally got to the point of this meeting. Emilia's punishment.
'So, what happened?' Gloria asked later that day.
'Ah, nothing really' Emilia sighed, leaning back in her chair and stretching out.
They were both in their dormitory now. Emilia was making the most of her free-time before her punishment. The window was open, letting in the refreshing breeze. Emilia was getting all the lovely air, and so was her stump. Her leg was resting on the bed beside her.
'Anna said I have to do cleaning' Emilia yawned. 'Around the school you know. Helping out, with whatever, I think she did mention some gardening and stuff.'
'Do you know anything about gardening?' Gloria asked.
'No. Oh wait!' Emilia interrupted herself. 'Actually, I do know this one thing at least…. dandelions are the only flower that represents the three celestial bodies…the sun, represented by the flower, the moon, which is the puff ball, and the dispersing seeds…which represent the stars.'
'That's very interesting' Gloria said to the book she was rifling through. One of her text books from class.
'Oh! I have another one! If you cut a dandelion, it will grow back just to spite you. And I kinda like that about them…and despite being considered a weed, they are actually part of the same family as sunflowers. They thrive even in the most difficult conditions, like concrete.'
'You seem to know a lot of facts' Gloria commented.
'Only a surface-level knowledge.'
'So when do you start these chores?' Gloria asked.
'Later today, after class.'
'How long do you have to do it for?'
'Ages, like three months.'
'Three months!' Gloria echoed.
'It was still worth it' Emilia grinned, blinking slowly and shooting a smirk towards Gloria. 'Don't forget I beat you. Don't forget.'
'I won't' Gloria laughed. 'You won that one, fair and square…. maybe.'

Emilia's punishment wasn't so bad, in fact, Emilia had begun to enjoy the tasks given to her, accepting them as part of her normal day-to-day routine.
She swept and mopped the floors, dusted the various rooms high up, in places that were hard to reach and rarely seen. She emptied bins, picked weeds, helped out with the laundry, that in

itself was a herculean task. Although the workers in the school were more than happy to have the extra help. And for three whole months!
Lucky them.
Emilia was permitted a break from her tasks for a few days within one week, when she fell out of a window trying to reach some weeds growing out of the wall. She landed on her shoulder and was sore for a time. But as soon as she was better, and the bruising had gone, she was ordered back to work.
'I don't mind,' Emilia was saying to Bootsie, the lady in charge of gardening. 'It's all good.'
Bootsie had been absent for the longest time. Emilia had only recently seen her about. The only other time had been when Emilia had first entered the school.
This was due to a tragedy Bootsie had suffered. Her grandmother, whom she loved dearly, had finally died of old age.
And that is why she was absent for the longest time.
Bootsie's grandmother lived far away, and so Bootsie had to travel to be with her in her final days.
'I don't get much free-time though' Emilia continued. 'They've copied my time-table so they know every single moment I have a break. So I don't really get many breaks anymore. They give me time to eat and stuff…' she sighed, 'but uh…yeah. Most of my free-time isn't free anymore. I do chores now.'
'Oh I see' Bootsie replied, putting down her bucket full of weeds. 'Remind me what you did again? Weren't you fighting in the library?'
'Not exactly. Well yes, but sort of no.'
Bootsie tilted her head towards Emilia.
'I was fencing' Emilia explained.
'In the library?'
'Yes' Emilia spoke clearly and proudly. 'I would also like to mention that I won.'
'Right.' Bootsie glanced at her watch briefly. 'We can take a break now if you like.'
'That would be cool.'
'I'll go get some sandwiches for us' Bootsie said. 'What do you want?'
'I don't mind getting something for us.'
'No no. I've heard about our fainting sprees. I'll go get something. What do you want?'
'Oh.' Emilia averted her eyes uncomfortably. 'Um, anything. I don't mind.'
'You're not allergic to anything?'
'No.'
Bootsie nodded, taking off her gloves and shoving them in her pocket.
'I'll be back in a few minutes.'
Emilia turned away from her, and sat upon the grass.
She remained there, still for a time, before letting out a sigh and lying back, stretching out and gazing up at the clouds.
She smiled widely to herself.
Dear mother in hell. Today, life is good….
Emilia blinked slowly, once, then again.
She closed her eyes, sighing again.
She began to nod off to sleep.
It was warm. It was comfortable. It was peaceful.
Emilia shifted slightly, reaching down her body and taking off her false leg, pushing it away.

Emilia rolled onto her side, falling still again.
Sleep took her.

About ten minutes or so later, she was woken by a gentle shake.
Emilia sat up, smiling to Bootsie.
'You're back.'
'I wasn't gone that long, was I?'
'Not at all' Emilia replied, taking the sandwich offered to her. 'Mmmm. Tuna. Thank you.'
Bootsie sat down on the grass beside her, biting into her own sandwich as Emilia tore the packet of hers open.
'So how are you feeling?' Emilia asked Bootsie. 'Truth be told I forgot you existed.'
Bootsie smiled.
'You are an odd one aren't you.'
'I've been told similar things' Emilia said between mouthfuls. 'I'm sorry if my question was too personal.'
'It's fine. I don't mind talking about it.' Bootsie crossed her legs, chewing on her sandwich for a few moments as she collected her thoughts. 'Well,' she began. 'I'm feeling…good…truth be told.'
'Well, that's good' Emilia spoke with her mouth full.
'I just…' Bootsie spoke with a distant voice and eyes glazed over. 'It was an odd time. I was sad of course for what happened, and of course I miss her very much. But the evening after the funeral is something I will never forget. Because…'
Emilia did not interrupt, but continued to watch Bootsie silently, continuing to stuff her sandwich in her mouth.
'It was a beautiful evening; the sunset was just…oh…' a smile flickered upon Bootsie's face. 'It was something like I had never seen before. the skies were grey, but it was beautiful. And the world seemed black and white because of the weak light from the sun. It looked so unusual, but it looked so nice, and felt right.'
Emilia nodded enthusiastically at this.
'Sounds really cool. I don't think I've ever seen anything like that' Emilia said.
'Nor have I. It was just that one time. And the clouds were so unusual and…just odd.'
'You should have taken a picture' Emilia said without thinking.
'It didn't occur to me at the time.'
'Oh. Sorry.'
'It's ok.'
The two were silent for a moment. Emilia finished eating, and just enjoyed the moment, as Bootsie ate more slowly.
Once Bootsie had finished her sandwich, she continued speaking.
'Even though I was of course heart-broken and devastated at having lost my grandmother, I had a wonderful time playing in the water, with my mother and daughter. It's a memory I will never forget.'
'I didn't know you had a daughter.'
'I have three. The other two are overseas. They are older and both pursuing their education in different medical degrees.'
'Woah, that's so cool' Emilia said. 'They must be super-smart.'

‘Well, I think so. They are definitely both much smarter than me. I don’t understand half the stuff they do.’
A silence passed between them.
‘I think it’s nice’ Emilia said, ‘being able to find joy in a time of sadness.’
‘Yeah, and make wonderful memories along the way. I don’t want to be too sad though’ Bootsie said. ‘I know my grandmother is watching over me and my family. And I know I will see her again someday.’
‘Definitely.’
‘Anyway’ Bootsie said, clapping her hands on her thighs and rising. ‘We should get back to work. Do you need help standing?’
‘No,’ Emilia hastened, reaching for her leg and fixing it back on. ‘I’ll be alright. Gimmie a sec.’
She was up in no time, patting herself down and straightening up.
‘All ready!’ She beamed. ‘What needs doing next?’
‘Pass me those clippers in that bucket over there. It’s gotten a little overgrown in this corner. Those darn brambles are back again.’
‘I like brambles’ Emilia said absentmindedly, taking the clippers from her.
Bootsie frowned at her. ‘Make sure they’re all cut back.’
‘No problem!’ Emilia gleamed.

Several hours later when Emilia was finally free from all her chores and tasks, she returned to her dorm-room, falling forwards onto her bed.
‘Hey Emilia’ Gloria said, looking over at her from her own bed. ‘How are you feeling?’
‘Ugh.’
‘That bad hu?’ Gloria chucked. ‘Was it still worth it?’
‘Oh yeah’ Emilia grinned, rolling over just enough to free her face from the sheets, so that her words were not muffled. ‘Totally was worth it.’
Gloria dipped her head, looking back to the book she was studying. It was something from class. Emilia wasn’t paying attention though.
‘Hey Gloria?’ Emilia voiced then.
‘Yeah?’
‘Do you think you will see your loved ones again when you die?’
Gloria closed her book. ‘I hope so…I mean…that would be nice.’
‘Hmm’ Emilia sighed, turning back into her sheets. ‘There’s no-one waiting for me in the afterlife’ she said, her voice muffled. ‘At least not yet. But maybe that’s a good thing…I don’t know…’
‘Sorry I didn’t catch that.’ Gloria waited for Emilia to repeat herself, but she didn’t. Instead, she continued to stay silent. ‘Emilia?’
It seemed that Emilia had already fallen asleep, in the span of just a few seconds.
‘Aw’ Gloria whispered to herself. ‘Poor thing. She must be exhausted. I should let her rest.’

That night, Emilia dreamed of heaven.
It was a lot like the life she was living now, only there was no air pollution or climate change, and people were a lot more tolerant of each other, and it was sunny more often than not.
Emilia woke early the next morning, feeling a little chilly, and a little damp around the face.

Apparently, she had been sleeping with her mouth open again, and had dribbled about the place, making her blanket wet.
Groaning in annoyance, and feeling a little stiff, Emilia pushed herself into a sitting position, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.
It was dark, the lights were off, though as Emilia glanced across the room, she could see Gloria's still figure, tucked beneath the sheets snugly, and fast asleep.
Emilia smiled, feeling a strong surge of affection for her companion then.
She rubbed the back of her neck, groaning.
Tilting her head towards the window, she could see the sky had only just begun to lighten, though the sun had not come up yet, still tucked safely behind the horizon, cosy like Gloria in her bed.
The bed sheets for us, are kinda like the horizon for the sun' Emilia whispered to herself.
I remember in my story books I read as a kid, pictures of the sun rising, using the fields as a blanket on the horizon.
Emilia smiled to herself at the memory.
The only time I was ever read stories was at school. You never had time to read to me mother. That's why I learned to read to myself. I didn't need you.
Emilia gave a self-satisfied smile, feeling smug, feeling worthy.
She ruffled up her hair, rubbed her eyes and stretched.
'Guess I'll head out then' she spoke quietly to herself. 'But first I need to freshen up.'

After a quick shower, a change of clothes, and brushing her teeth and hair, Emilia headed out.
The sun had climbed a little higher, and was just beginning to show its tip over the hills.
Emilia began to wander, heading in no particular direction. Her meandering path led her to the open fields, upon which she saw a dancing figure.
Emilia slowed to her stop, focusing entirely on this figure, poised, elegant, the morning light shining behind her.
Emilia's heart skipped a beat.
'Is this a goddess I see before me?' she breathed, suddenly struck with awe and admiration. 'No, wait, it's just Shannon.'
It was the green-haired girl with 'cabbage-hair' as Emilia secretly referred to it as.
Emilia watched her for a time, admiring her posture, her perfect form.
She was mesmerized, unable to tear her eyes away.
She truly looked angelic with the light shining behind her.
Shannon stopped moving suddenly, lowering her arms and her leg from the pose she had been maintaining, and turning to face Emilia.
Oh crap she can see me!
Emilia raised her hand awkwardly, waving to Shannon.
Shannon's silhouetted waved back.
Guess I should go over to say 'hi,' it would look weird if I walked away now.
Emilia strode her way towards Shannon, trying her best to walk with confidence.
She approached Shannon.
'Why are you walking like that?' Shannon immediately asked.
'Uh…w-walking like what?' Emilia asked defensively, suddenly caught off-guard.
'All weird like that.'

‘I’m not walking weird’ Emilia spluttered.
‘Um. Ok?’
Emilia stared at Shannon with pursed lips.
‘W-what are you doing up so early?’ Emilia asked.
‘I couldn’t sleep’ Shannon said. ‘What about you?’
‘Same I guess. Ha ha.’
‘Right.’
Subject is not responsive. Try complimenting.
‘You…look really nice dancing by the way.’
‘Oh, thank you’ Shannon smiled. ‘I thought it would be nice to practice when no-one else was around.’
Oh crap! Maybe that’s a hint for me to leave.
‘Should I go?’ Emilia offered. ‘I don’t want to bother you.’
‘Oh no no, I didn’t mean it like that. I was going to take a break now anyone.’
‘Oh, that’s great. D-do you mind if I sit with you?’
‘Why are you stuttering?’ Shannon asked her suddenly, reaching forwards and placing a hand upon Emilia’s forehead. ‘Are you feeling well?’
She’s touching me…
‘You’re a little flushed.’
‘Am I?’ Emilia used every ounce of her strength and will to speak confidently, or at least try to. ‘I didn’t notice.’
‘Maybe you need something to eat. Have you eaten yet?’ Shannon asked.
‘No.’
‘Maybe that’s it’ Shannon concluded, withdrawing her hand.
‘Ah! Yes, maybe that’s it.’
Shannon frowned at her with amusement.
‘Should we get breakfast together? I don’t want you fainting again. You need to eat something.’
‘Ah! Yes. Yes, I would love food.’
‘You’re so weird’ Shannon laughed, turning away and grabbing her bags. ‘Come on, let’s go.’

A short time later, Emilia was staring into Shannon’s face, as Shannon shovelled cereal into her mouth hungrily. Emilia remembered how Shannon had caught her in her arms in the library, when Emilia had fallen from the bookshelves.
The thought still made her heart flutter.
Shannon glanced up, and spoke with a mouth full of food.
‘What are you looking at?’
Emilia balked.
‘Oh, look! Maddy’s here.’
Shannon looked around, seeing Maddy enter the canteen.
Besides from a single member of kitchen staff, currently organising the cereal stand out front, there were only three of them in this large room.
Maddy grabbed a small box of cereal and a banana. Not stopping to eat however, she sailed by towards the other door within the room, the one leading outside.

‘Hey’ she said flatly to Shannon and Emilia as she passed by them. ‘You don’t look anywhere near as tall when you sit’ Maddy commented, staring at Emilia as she did so. ‘So deceiving. You appear like a giant when you stand. I wonder how many false legs you’ve needed over the years.’
She said all this without slowing in her step. And without another word, she left through the other door, stepping outside and allowing the door to swing shut behind her.
‘Dammit’ Emilia cursed under her breath, going even redder. ‘The one thing I’m insecure about.’
‘Don’t let her get to you’ Shannon comforted. ‘She doesn’t mean it, she’s just…odd like that.’
‘I know I know’ Emilia mumbled. ‘It was just…very sudden and unexpected, that’s all.’
‘I understand.’
‘I wonder where she takes her food. I wonder why she’s won’t eat in here with everyone else’ Emilia said out-loud.
Shannon shrugged her shoulders.
‘Maybe she doesn’t like crowds. Or maybe she doesn’t like this room.’
‘What’s wrong with this room?’ Emilia asked.
‘Nothing I can find’ Shannon said. ‘I’ve seen her eating in the library a lot, and when she gardens.’
‘I thought you weren’t allowed to eat in the library’ Emilia asked.
‘They seem to let it slide for her’ Shannon said, shrugging again.
Emilia averted her eyes to her own breakfast, which was a huge pile of toast and honey with berries.
They continued to eat in silence for a time, each concerned with their plates.
After a few moments, Emilia’s eyes drifted up to Shannon again.
She’s so beautiful…

Chapter 20

Later that day

Emilia and Shannon were sitting together, in the same place they had met that morning.
Emilia had a rare moment to herself. No lessons, no chores, and so she decided to come to this spot again, in case she was to see Shannon. And amazingly, there she was…
They saw each other once again, and Emilia went over to her.
Shannon had been practicing her ballet, as she had been before.
‘It almost seems like you’ve been here all day’ Emilia told her.
‘I promise I’ve gone to lessons today’ Shannon told her. Shannon lowered her arms from her pose. ‘I was just about to take a break. Would you like to sit with me?’
‘That would be great’ Emilia said, feeling a flutter in her heart.
They sat on the grass side-by-side, and began to talk.
They spoke back and forth for a time, though Emilia did most of the talking.
Somehow, they got onto the discussion of Emilia’s favourite philosopher.

'…one day, Alexander sought him out, and found him relaxing in the sun. Alexander offered him any favour, only to be told to move away, as Alexander was blocking the sun. He was often insulted by being called a 'dog,' but he took this name on himself, because he praised the dog and its virtues. Like the dog, he did not recognise society and considering himself above it. and was often referred to as Socrates gone mad.'
'That's very interesting' Shannon said. 'You know a lot about ancient history and stuff.'
'Well,' Emilia sighed, 'there are a lot of wonders in our past. I think it would be a shame if all that information were to be lost to time.'
'Yeah, you're right.'
'I'd like to see you practice dancing again' Emilia spoke up.
'Why don't you practice with me?' Shannon asked.
'Actually' Emilia said, hanging her head. 'I…would like to watch you practice instead. Only if you don't mind.'
'I get it' Shannon said, 'you want to learn from a professional.'
'Definitely.'
'Well,' Shannon spoke into her hand. 'I've still a lot to learn but…thank you. You can join me anytime if you want.'
'Ok.'
'I hope it's not awkward with your false leg' Shannon said, rising to her feet again.
'I'm used to it. I can always take it off if it gets uncomfortable. Good thing I got two legs hu?'
'It sure is' Shannon smiled, moving away.
The two became silent, and Shannon began to practice, while Emilia watched. And as she did, Emilia fell a little more in love with her.
I've actually been quite lucky now that I think of it, Emilia thought to herself, as she watched Shannon move.
Emilia smirked then.
That time you threw me down the stairs mother? Jokes on you, I only broke one of my legs. So there! Back when I had two working legs that is…
Emilia hugged her knees to her, watching Shannon closely.
I hope I'm not being creepy and staring too much…

Chapter 21

After the moment they shared together on that little hill, Emilia and Shannon began to date. They made it official, and would even be affectionate out in public, which Emilia liked very much.
On one of these days Shannon was sitting on Emilia's lap. It was a lovely day and everyone was outside enjoying the sun.
'God, will you two get a room' Gloria rolled her eyes.
'We would love that very much' Emilia replied without looking away from Shannon.

The two were smitten with each other, once the initial awkwardness had worn off, they were in their full honeymoon swing.
'That's actually a great idea' Shannon said, holding Emilia's face tendering in her hands, before hugging her tightly. 'I would love to share a room with Emilia.'
'Well too bad' Gloria said in a monotone as she took a bite from her sandwich. 'I'm not moving all my stuff just so you guys can have sex.'
'You don't have to move your stuff for that' Emilia grinned.
'Ew!' Gloria recoiled. 'You both better stay away from my bed!'
Before Emilia had the chance to reply with something sarcastic, which was inevitable for her, Gloria tossed a book over to her, smacking her squarely in the side of the head.
'Ow!'
'It's been too long since you've read poetry' Gloria told her. 'Maybe you should start reading poetry.'
'Hey that's a great idea' Emilia beamed, looking back at Shannon who continued to straddle her.
Both continued to gaze at the other adoringly.
'Scratch that' Gloria interrupted. 'I changed my mind. You'll only read something romantic.'
'How about this' Emilia suggested, 'I'll fence with you and if I win, I can read as many romantic poems as I like and you can't complain.'
Gloria turned towards Emilia with a smirk.
'You're on loser.'
Shannon went to go get the equipment while Emilia and Gloria stayed where they were, trying to focus, mentally preparing for the face-off. Emilia more-so, she knew her skills were still lacking.
Shannon returned shortly after, carrying everything.
The two girls changed quickly, putting on the white jackets, masks and gloves and everything else that the fencing class provided.
Emilia and Gloria moved a few steps away to flatter ground, facing each other.
Upon the gentle slope of the hill a nearby, Shannon watched.
Minutes later, all three girls were sitting once more, the fencing clothes folded neatly and placed on a bag to keep it clean from the green grass.
Emilia was sulking.
'Oh, come on' Gloria sang, unable to keep the smugness from her voice. 'You moved too fast, you need to do a better job studying your opponent and make the right move, not act impulsively.'
'You couldn't even let yourself lose this one time to help my confidence?' Emilia grumbled sullenly, looking away.
'Not a chance!' Gloria sang. 'Why on earth would I do that?'
'To make me look good in front of my new girlfriend?' Emilia replied.
'Don't be ridiculous' Gloria laughed.
'Come on' Shannon said to Emilia, 'you can still read a poem, just nothing romantic. Maybe you can read something like that when we're alone together.'
'Hm.'
Still sulking a little, Emilia took the book Shannon held out to her, flipping through the pages lazily.
After a few moments, Emilia settled on a poem. She began to read.

"I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead;
I lift my lids and all is born again.
(I think I made you up inside my head.)

The stars go waltzing out in blue and red,
And arbitrary blackness gallops in:
I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.

I dreamed that you bewitched me into bed
And sung me moon-struck, kissed me quite insane.
(I think I made you up inside my head.)

God topples from the sky, hell's fires fade:
Exit seraphim and Satan's men:
I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.

I fancied you'd return the way you said,
But I grow old and I forget your name.
(I think I made you up inside my head.)

I should have loved a thunderbird instead;
At least when spring comes they roar back again.
I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.
(I think I made you up inside my head.)"

Emilia closed the pages of the book once she had finished the poem, placing the book carefully down beside her.
‘Beautifully read’ Shannon smiled.
‘I thought so too’ Emilia gleamed smugly.
‘And I thought I said nothing romantic’ Gloria frowned.
‘Oopsie’ Emilia shrugged carelessly.
‘Anyway’ Gloria said, lifting her wrist to check her watch. ‘I’d better get going. I have class soon. What about you two?’
‘We both have next period free’ Emilia spoke up for the both of them.
Gloria became instantly suspicious at the faintly surprised expression on Shannon’s face.
‘Do you really?’ Gloria asked flatly.
‘Yes absolutely’ Emilia answered hastily.
Shannon began to giggle.
‘Well, you can do what you want’ Gloria turned away, reaching for her bag. ‘Not my business.’
She rose to her feet, brushing the flecks of grass from her skirt.
‘See you guys around’ Gloria nodded to them.
‘Bye Gloria!’ Emilia called out, waving enthusiastically to her.
Gloria gave Emilia the smallest frown as she turned, marching away.
It was just Emilia and Shannon now.

‘Looks like it’s just you and me now’ Emilia said.
Shannon giggled excitedly.
Emilia reached for her, wrapping her arms around Shannon and leaning into her shoulder.
She took a deep breath.
‘Hmmmm…. you smell nice.’
Shannon giggled again. ‘So do you.’
Emilia’s heart skipped a little at that. She sighed again, allowing her body to relax, closing her eyes contentedly.
Dear mother in hell. I am happy.
‘Oh!’ Shannon said abruptly, giving Emilia a slight surprise.
‘What is it?’ Emilia asked, straightening slightly.
‘I’m visiting my family soon. Remember I told you about them?’
‘Yes, I do.’ Emilia hesitated. ‘Don’t they…live far away?’
‘Yes. That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. I’ll be gone for a few days.’
‘Noooooooooooooooo!’
Emilia flopped back on the floor, and began flailing around like a fish.
‘Stop that’ Shannon scolded. ‘You’ll hurt yourself.’
Emilia groaned, slowly sitting back up, making a big performance of it.
She turned back to face Shannon, to hear what she had to say.
‘Are you listening?’ Shannon asked.
‘Indubitably.’
Shannon frowns.
‘You’re so cute when you make a face like that’ Emilia teased, leaning closer to Shannon so that their lips nearly touched.
‘Stop that’ Shannon said, placing a hand over Emilia’s mouth for a moment, before quickly drawing it back. ‘Did you just lick me?!’
‘No?’
Shannon grumbled, wiping her hand furiously on her top.
‘What I’m trying to say is, that I’m leaving soon’ Shannon said.
‘You’re going to leave me?’
‘Only for a short time’ Shannon gleamed. ‘I am going to see my family.’
‘Your family?’
‘Mh hm.’
Emilia furrowed her brow thoughtfully.
‘Hold on a second, your family live far away, don’t they? I mean…*very* far away.’
‘They do’ Shannon replied.
Emilia turned away, hugging her knees to her chest.
‘How long are you going to be gone for exactly?’
‘It’ll be a few weeks.’
‘A few weeks?’ Emilia echoed. ‘You said a few days!’
‘Yeah. I’m…. I’m sorry.’
‘No need to be sorry’ Emilia told her. ‘You need to go to your family.’
‘Yeah’ Shannon spoke softly.
There was a silence between them, a silence where neither spoke for a time.
‘A few weeks hu?’ Emilia said.
‘Yeah.’

They were silent for a little longer.
'I'm…gonna miss you' Emilia voiced quietly.
Shannon looked to her.
She reached towards Emilia, caressing her cheek softly, before leaning into her and kissing her gently.
Shannon leant back, smiling.
'So, um…tell me more about…this trip' Emilia said. 'How come you're leaving suddenly?'
'My family say they want to tell me something.'
'Oh really?' Emilia said. 'They can't do that over the phone?'
'Well, they said it's something important and that they want to tell me in person.'
'Hm.' Emilia made a funny face. 'I wonder what it is.'
'Yeah.'
'So, when are you leaving?'
'Sometime next week' Shannon replied. 'I only learned about it this morning. You are the first one I've told.'
'Good' Emilia giggled excitedly. 'I'm glad you told me first. And I'm glad I get to keep you for a few more days.'
'Keep me?' Shannon echoed. 'I'm not some kind of pet you know.'
'Of course you are. You are my pet. You belong to me.'
Emilia began to aggressively tickle her, and Shannon screamed and wriggled, trying to free herself from Emilia's attack.
'Help! I'm dying!' Shannon screamed.
'Oh stop' Emilia sighed, sitting herself in the centre of Shannon's back, pinning her down. 'I barely touched you.'
'Are you eating an apple?' Shannon asked, hearing a crunch above her.
'Mmmhmmm.'
'Where and when did you get that?'
'Up there' Emilia pointed to the tree nearby. 'Earlier when you were completely distracted and ignoring me on your phone.'
'I wasn't ignoring you!'
Emilia got off Shannon's back, shuffling to the side to give Shannon space.
Shannon gratefully sat up, rubbing her back.
'I wasn't ignoring you' Shannon repeated. 'I was just texting someone. Jeez you can be so clingy sometimes.'
'I don't know what you mean!' Emilia declared loudly, learning into Shannon and hugging her arm tightly.
'Stop! You'll make my arm go numb! And don't dribble on me!'
They continued this way for a while, before Emilia told Shannon that it was time.
'Got to get your chores done hu?'
'Yeah' Emilia smiled, brushing a strand of hair behind an ear and rising. 'I'll text you later.'
'Ok.'
Emilia leant down, kissing Shannon on the lips lovingly, adoration emanating from her.
'Bye baby' Emilia said.
'Bye Emilia' Shannon replied. 'And stop stalling.'
Emilia made a pouting face at Shannon, before straightening up.

She turned and walked away, swinging her hips as she went, and glancing back over her shoulder to see if Shannon was watching.
She was.
Shannon watched her go, smiling to herself.
'Oh Emilia' she sighed. 'I'm gonna miss you. I haven't even left and already I'm looking forward to coming back.'

Chapter 22

Finally next week came along, as it inevitably would.
'Time' Emilia had said, through her tears as she made her goodbyes to Shannon, 'waits for no one…no man…nor woman…has enough power to stop time or change its course…no matter how strongly they may wish for it.'
'Will you stop crying' Shannon scolded, wiping away her own tears. 'I'm not going to be gone forever.'
Emilia only cried harder, hugging her tighter.
Gloria had to practically to pry Emilia off Shannon so that Shannon could leave.
Gloria comforted Emilia, who continued to sob, dabbing a handkerchief to her eyes.
Shannon eventually left, getting into the passenger seat of a car which waited for her.
Emilia saw a mature woman in the driver's seat. One of her family members perhaps.
Shannon had packed none of her possessions, having everything she needed already in her family home.
Emilia watched tearfully as the car drove away. She stayed rooted to the spot, until the car was completely out of sight.
'Come on' Gloria said, gently tugging at Emilia's sleeve. 'Let's go back inside.'
'In a minute' Emilia replied.
'Don't you have class?'
'In a minute' Emilia repeated. 'I just want some time alone.'

Gloria left her there, heading back to continue her own business.
Emilia stayed put for the longest time, simply staring into nothingness. She did not notice a single thing around her, not the fact that she was getting light-headed, nor the voice calling to her from a short distance away.
Emilia only broke her sight from the last spot she had seen the car, when her vision began to cloud over.
Emilia sunk to the floor, feeling weak.
She felt a hand upon her shoulder, and a voice she couldn't identify, nor understand.
It was only later when she woke in the nurse's office, that she realised what had happened.
'I guess it's my fault for leaving you alone' Gloria had said to her. 'I know you miss Shannon but…' it seemed like Gloria was going to say more, but changed her mind, perhaps thinking that it wouldn't be worth it.
Instead, she silently shook her head, sighing and rolling her eyes.
'Here' she said to Emilia instead, handing her a chocolate bar and a sugary drink.

‘Thanks’ Emilia mumbled, taking the things from her, and beginning to consume both items.
‘I’ll see you later I guess’ Gloria mumbled. ‘Oh, and don’t forget you still have chores to do.’
Emilia raised her head slightly.
‘Oh’ Emilia said. ‘Thanks for reminding me. I’ll see you later then, and thanks for the um….’
Emilia indicated the things she was holding,
‘No worries’ Gloria said. ‘See you.’
‘Ok. Bye.’
Emilia watched Gloria go, waiting until she was completely gone, before putting down her drink.
She quickly finished her chocolate bar, shovelling it in her mouth, before pulling out her phone and sending a text to Shannon:

Heeeeeeeeeey!
How you doin?
I am in hospitl

It was only a few moments later that Shannon replied:

Hospital! Why?

Emilia replied:

Nurse!
So sorry didn’t mean to scare u

Shannon replied:

Dont scare me like that! You forgot to eat again didnt you?
I’ll call you later tonight when your free
Look after yourself better plz. Luv u

Emilia hugged the phone to her chest, feeling warmth inside, her heart bursting with love, and amongst that, a twinge of longing and loneliness.
She finished her drink quickly, before informing the nurse that she was leaving, and heading back outside to her next class.

Chapter 23

Several weeks passed, nearly a month, and Emilia desperately began to miss her beloved, and spent a lot of time texting and trying to call her.
At first Shannon was very talkative on calls, always answering, always texting. But one day, she simply stopped answering.
Emilia shared her concerns with her roommate, but Gloria just reassured her that everything was probably fine.
Emilia simply would laugh and agree, pretending to shrug off her worries. But at the back of her mind, these were worries she could not shake.
Dam. I hope you're ok Shannon.

One day, Emilia wanted to see the sunset, and so she climbed out of the window of her dorm-room while Gloria wasn't there.
She climbed up the side of the building like a monkey. Her false leg fell on the way up, but it didn't bother her.
She reached the roof, and managed to watch the most beautiful sunset she had ever seen at that school. The view was magnificent, and Emilia felt like a bird being so high up.
She watched the sun dip below the horizon, taking the daylight with it, and so it became dark.
Emilia only decided to return to her room when it began to get cold, only it was more difficult now with one leg, her false leg still somewhere on the floor below her, perhaps in a bush.
As Emilia was climbing down the building, she slipped, and fell almost the entire way.
Emilia landed somewhere near her leg, she was able to see it a short distance from her, even in the dark.
'Ah' Emilia sighed, her heart still pounding in her chest as adrenaline coursed through her body. 'There's my leg.'

Emilia was found shortly after by a member of staff. The headmistress Anna was furious with Emilia for the stunt she had pulled, and berated her very enthusiastically for doing something so dangerous, not stopping the entire time they waited for the ambulance to arrive.
Emilia's good leg was clearly broken, but luckily Emilia was only in a moderate amount of pain, and actually found herself quite comfortable on the grassy floor she now lay on, using her false leg wrapped in a jumper as a weird sort of pillow.
Several authority figures stood like spectres around her, but Emilia was at ease, and took great pleasure in admiring the scenery around her, the faint lights about the place, the twinkling stars in the evening sky, that grew ever-brighter as the night stretched on.
It was all very nice.
'Oh look' Emilia mumbled to herself, seeing a flower above her upon the wall, 'there's another painting by that Gone Girl. I never noticed that one before. How lovely.'

The teachers around her didn't hear, instead their attention was turned towards the ambulance that had now arrived. They couldn't see it clearly, but the flashing silent lights could be seen well from far away.
Emilia smiled to herself as the paramedics rushed up to her, barely hearing their questions.
Dear mother in hell. The night tonight is beautiful…

Chapter 24

Emilia was rushed to hospital, staying there for a time before returning to school.
She had broken her tibia in the fall, and now had to wear an external fixation apparatus as her body continued to heal.
'It's called an ilizarov apparatus' Emilia was saying, touching the metal rods eagerly. 'It reshapes damaged bones. You should have seen it; you could tell right away it was broken' she said enthusiastically. 'It was really gross and awesome. I should have taken a picture.'
'I can't believe you' Gloria was saying, as beside her Tulip leaned forward to see the metal. 'I can't believe you actually did that.'
'You're starting to sound like Anna' Emilia rolled her eyes turning away. 'She was pretty mad for some reason….'
'So now both your legs are…um…' Tulip trailed off.
'Yup' Emilia beamed happily. 'One is gone, the other is broken. Lucky I can still walk right? I am so grateful to Anthony Hopkins.'
'Who's that?' Tulip asked.
'My beloved prosthetist' Emilia said.
'What's that?' Tulip asked.
'A doctor' Emilia said. 'A healthcare professional who makes and fits artificial limbs.'
'Ooohhh.'
'Yeah, he's a really nice guy' Emilia went on, beaming brightly. 'It's nice to have a doctor who's so chill.'

Chapter 25

Shannon had not even so much as text Emilia in the longest time. But she returned to school suddenly, and without warning.
Emilia saw her by chance, when heading to her next lesson. Shannon was taking part in her ballet lessons.
Emilia stopped to stare at her, remaining where she was.

She sensed something was wrong however. By some unknown instinct, even without seeing Shannon's unhappy expression.
Emilia furrowed her brow, staring at Shannon for a time as she practiced and danced.
Emilia remained where she was for a moment, before turning away, continuing her way to her next lesson, walking slowly as she did.

Chapter 26

Emilia tried to reach Shannon, but it was a few days before the two were able to be alone together.
'My love. Shannon. What's wrong? Why won't you speak to me? Is there something I've done to upset you?'
'No' Shannon breathed. 'No. You've done nothing wrong. I'm…sorry I never…I…I'm sorry I…'
Emilia let go of her slowly, letting her hands slide down Shannon's shoulders and away.
She did not speak, instead waited for Shannon to continue.
'I um…I…I'm sorry I didn't text you. I'm sorry I didn't reply. I saw but….and I know I should have called you…'
'Shannon' Emilia spoke softly. 'What happened, when you went to meet your family. Did someone hurt you? Did…someone touch you?'
'No. No its nothing like that.'
Emilia waited.
'You don't have to tell me if you don't want to' Emilia said.
Shannon was silent for a time, hanging her head.
'Do you want me to leave?' Emilia said. 'I don't mind…. I would understand…'
'No, I want you to stay' Shannon said.
Emilia faltered. She wasn't sure what to do now. She'd never seen Shannon so…broken.
They went away together, to a quiet place where they could be alone.

'I've just found out…' Shannon said, 'that um…'
Emilia watched her silently, without reaction, her expression neutral.
Finally, Shannon spoke again.
'I'm a…I'm an…. affair baby. My…father cheated on my mother. She's not even my mother…I…' Tears streamed down her face. 'I've destroyed my entire family…'

Chapter 27
Shannon's Story

Shannon had grown up in a close-knit and loving family. An ordinary family, a family like any other.
Or so she had believed for the longest time.
When Shannon was around four years old, her father fell in love with another woman. She (the woman) was younger, somewhat naïve. She knew the man she had fallen in love with was married with a daughter, but she believed that somehow, that marriage was not meant to be. She believed that somehow, things would change and work in her favour. She did not have any sort of malicious intent. But one could not help who they fell in love with, nor change their feelings.
She believed that she was the true soulmate of the man she had fallen in love with, and that the other woman, his wife, had simply been lucky enough to have found him first.
When the wife, Shannon's true mother, had found out that her husband had been unfaithful to her, she left. Not only her husband, but her daughter too. She walked out of both of their lives, and went away.
Shannon was only a toddler when this happened, and while she missed her mother at the time, and asked for her often, using what words she knew, as the days went by, her mother faded from her memory.
After a time, her father moved to another home, taking Shannon with him. Shannon was introduced to the woman her father had fallen in love with, not knowing what to make of the situation at first, she took each day as it came. She slept in a new bed, in a new house, and as time went on, she began to love this woman, as she had her own mother, and even called her so.
She entirely forgot about her own real mother.
A few years later, she became an older sister to a baby brother. And about a year or so after that, she gained a second baby brother. As she grew, she became not only an older sister to her two young half-brothers, but a sort of guardian for them too,
The family loved each other, and everyone was happy. But Shannon's parents knew, and they never told her, not until she became a little older.
It was as she was reaching her eighteenth birthday, that her grandmother on her mother's side, her true mother, made contact with her father. She warned him to tell Shannon the truth, or else she would. She told her father, that Shannon had a right to know the truth.

So, one day, Shannon's father pulled Shannon from school. Shannon went to her home to visit her family, and that is when her father told her the truth.
The woman she had called mother all those years, was not her real mother, and her brothers, were only half-siblings to her.
Her mother, her step-mother, had always favoured her brothers. Shannon had never thought much about this, in the back of her mind she always told herself it was because they were several years younger than her. Or maybe it was because the woman her father had married, had wanted a son more than a daughter. Or that they were her own children and Shannon was not. She never really knew. But once Shannon was told the truth, it all made sense.

Shannon was devastated to have learned the truth, and as soon as it all came out in the open, every single member of her family started treating her differently, like an outsider, like she didn't even belong in her own home. Like she was the reason her father cheated.
Shannon could take no more, and so she left the people she knew, and went out searching for her real mother, her mother by blood.

Her real mother lived a long way away, and it took a long time for Shannon to travel there, which she did alone. As her father, nor anyone else, was willing to go with her.
Her mother lived with her own mother, Shannon's grandmother, many hours away.
Shannon's grandmother welcomed her into her home, Shannon's mother on the other hand, wanted nothing to do with her, which destroyed Shannon's already broken heart.
Shannon's real mother, had a family of her own now. She had a new husband, that Shannon did not meet, as he was away on work. But she did meet her mother's new children. Though only briefly. She had two daughters, twins, and another on the way.
Shannon's mother barely spoke to her, showing herself in a room only in passing, before heading out to work. Though she was far along her pregnancy, she still worked. Shannon's grandmother explained about the desk-job her mother worked, and a few other things that Shannon did not remember.

By the time Shannon returned to her father's house, she was a shell of her former self.
The part of her family on her father's side, his second wife, felt betrayed that she went to find her real mother, despite the fact they made it clear they felt *she* didn't belong. They were still upset she left.
In an instant, Shannon felt she had lost everything. Her life had been a lie, her very existence was built on deception.
Suddenly, Shannon didn't belong anywhere, and no one wanted her.
She existed like this for a time, feeling like a spirit. On the outside looking in.
It was like she wasn't there, like she wasn't living her own life anymore.
None of this felt real…

Chapter 28

Shannon was utterly broken. Emilia did everything she could to try to comfort her, but constantly doubted herself.
Should I stay with her? Should I give her space? What does she want? She won't tell me. She probably doesn't know herself…she hasn't eaten for a while. Oh no, when was the last time she ate? Is she hungry? Oh no, is this how others felt about me when I didn't eat? I feel terrible now…I mean…. I feel worse…oh god what is Shannon thinking? I wish I knew how to make her feel better.

‘I know you’re going to be ok’ Emilia said to her girlfriend, clasping her hands tightly in her own. ‘I know it. I just know’ Emilia grinned widely at Shannon, who did not meet her eye. ‘I know you’re going to be ok’ Emilia spoke confidently to Shannon, feeling no conviction behind her own words. ‘You just have to get past this rough patch, and things will be better. Things will be better on the other side. I promise you.’ Emilia caressed Shannon’s cheek, kneeling before her as she sat on her bed in her dorm room. ‘We’re all here for you. Just tell us what you want, and we can do it for you. We will do it.’

‘Ok.’

Emilia fought back the crushing hurt within her at Shannon’s non-committed and vague answer.

Emilia smiled again, appearing genuine, appearing calm and confident. Like so many times already, she could easily fool others around her, and show them a different self to the true one she felt inside.

‘I know you’re going to be ok’ Emilia whispered, leaning forwards and kissing Shannon on the forehead. ‘Remember your phone’ Emilia said to her, taking it from her bedside table and placing it upon Shannon’s lap.

Shannon instinctively moved her leg to keep it from falling to the floor.

‘I will be here’ Emilia said to her. ‘Even if it’s in the middle of the night, or in the middle of class, or whatever. If you need me, I will be by your side in an instant. Ok?’

‘Thanks.’

Emilia suppressed a sigh rising within her.

She kissed Shannon on the head again, squeezing her shoulders firmly before turning away.

‘I love you Shannon’ Emilia said to her as she walked away. ‘See you soon, ok?’

Shannon made an attempt on her own life the very next day. No one knew where she got the pills from.

She missed class. A student was sent to her room to look for her.

Shannon stayed in her room alone now, her roommate, Sarah, having long-gone to pursue a better life with her love.

Emilia did not learn about all of this until after Shannon was already in hospital.

Emilia cried, sobbing hysterically into her hands when she heard.

It took a few seconds for her mind truly process what she had just been told, before she collapsed.

A few moments later, Emilia fainted.

Chapter 29

Emilia came around sometime later, waking in the nurse's office.
As soon as she remembered what happened before she fainted, Emilia cried out Shannon's name, and begun to sob once more.

PART 2/2

Chapter 30

It was sometime later, Emilia did not know when, that she saw Shannon again.
Shannon looked ashamed, unable to meet her gaze.
Emilia simply hugged her, holding her close for a moment before stepping back.
'How are you doing?' Emilia asked so casually.
Shannon seemed caught off-guard, perhaps it was the casualness of Emilia's question.
'I…I'm good' she fumbled. Tears filled her eyes, her voice breaking. 'Emilia…I'm s-.'
Emilia hushed her quickly, placing her fingertips upon Shannon's lips.
'Shannon' Emilia smiled widely, 'we don't need to speak of anything you don't want to. Why don't we just enjoy each other's company?'
'Oh,' was all that she was able to say.
'We could watch some anime together' Emilia offered.
'What?'
'You know what anime is right?' Emilia said. 'We've never watched it together. Why don't we do that?'
'I've never really watched anime' Shannon spoke softly.
'Well,' Emilia said, caressing Shannon's cheeks tenderly. 'It will be all the more memorable.'
Emilia tilted her head, her hair falling about her shoulders.
'There's so much I can show you' Emilia told her. 'Maybe…you might even like it.'
'You never mentioned liking it before.'
'Ah…well…' Emilia laughed awkwardly. 'I guess it just slipped my mind.'
'Really?' Shannon added, unconvincingly.
'I guess…maybe you thought that I would be weird for liking it.'
'Emilia' Shannon said. 'I already think you're weird.'
Emilia chuckled lightly, before her expression becoming a little more serious.
'I've asked the headmistress for time off class for both of us' Emilia said.

‘What? No, you didn’t have to…’
‘She’s already said yes’ Emilia interrupted. ‘So, there’s no point in trying to argue. I love you Shannon, and I will do everything I can to make you smile again.’
Emilia took Shannon’s hand in her own, not giving her time to protest.
‘You don’t need to talk about anything you don’t want to’ Emilia said. ‘But if you do, I will be here to listen.’
She walked away, pulling Shannon gently along, her grasp on her was tender.
‘Oh’ Emilia said abruptly, as a thought suddenly occurred to her, ‘it’s nearly the end of the year. There’s a party at the end of the year.’
‘I remember’ Shannon mumbled.
‘You would look beautiful in a ball gown’ Emilia told her.

Chapter 31

Later that day, Emilia walked Shannon to her dorm-room.
The two of them went in silence, but it was a comfortable silence. They held hands as they walked.
Shannon walked mostly with her head dipped, glancing towards Emilia as they drew closer to her room.
Emilia noticed this, grinning widely at her. Shannon looked away again.
‘There you go’ Emilia said, letting go of her hand. ‘Here is your room. Would you like me to open the door for you?’
Shannon sighed.
‘I can open my own door thank you.’
‘Better safe than sorry’ Emilia said, reaching forwards and opening the door for her before leaning back. ‘After you.’
Shannon stepped into her room, looking around.
‘I hope you’re not lonely since Sarah left’ Emilia said to her, still lingering in the doorway. ‘May I come in?’
‘Of course you can come in.’ Shannon said to her. ‘You don’t need to ask.’
‘Thank you.’ Emilia took a dramatic step into the room. ‘Ah. That’s nice.’
Shannon moved over towards her bed. ‘I’m not’ she said. ‘Lonely I mean.’
‘That’s good. You know, I’m more than happy to keep you company here if you don’t mind.’
‘There’s no need for that. I’ll be ok.’
‘Ok!’
Emilia did a spin, the skirt of her uniform swaying around her.
Emilia stumbled a little, the pins still in her leg. She was able to straightened before Shannon was able to turn around.
Shannon had made no indication that she had noticed. In fact, she had not mentioned the pins in Emilia’s leg at all. Emilia thought that perhaps she hadn’t noticed at all.
And she was fine with that.
‘So how are you feeling?’ Emilia asked. ‘I mean in general.’

‘I’m pretty good.’
‘Listen, I have a good idea, but I needed to ok it with Anna first. Her being in charge of everything and all that.’
‘And what is this idea, dare I ask?’ Shannon said, sitting on her bed.
‘Well, I thought it would be nice if we could have a holiday together.’
‘A holiday?’ Shannon tilted her head.
Emilia gleamed. ‘I will have to ok it with the headmistress of course’ Emilia clarified, ‘but I would like to go away somewhere with you. Just the two of us. Wouldn’t that be cool?’
‘That would be very cool’ Shannon said. ‘Where did you have in mind?’
‘Hmm.’
Emilia sat beside her love.
‘When was the last time you went swimming?’ Emilia asked. ‘Oooooh! I wanna see you in a bikini!’
‘Stop’ Shannon giggled, blushing slightly. ‘I don’t know when the last time I went swimming was. It’s been a while.’
‘You *can* swim can’t you?’
‘Of course I can.’
‘Good, because my grandad lived to nearly ninety years old, and in all that time he never learned to swim. Isn’t that crazy?
‘That is pretty crazy’ Shannon said in a flat tone. ‘How come he never learned to swim?’
‘I think I heard that he nearly drowned in a lake when he was a toddler. And he’s been afraid of water ever since.’
‘That’s awful.’
‘It is’ Emilia said. ‘He never learned to swim…’
Shannon raised an eyebrow.
‘Anyway’ Emilia said, clapping her hands together, rising again and marching away. ‘I’m going to speak to Anna.’
‘Right now?’
‘Of course!’ Emilia said, turning back to face her, hands held sweetly behind the back. ‘What better time than the present.’
‘H-hold on a second’ Shannon called after her. ‘This is all so sudden. I haven’t agreed to anything yet.’
‘Don’t worry’ Emilia said, pausing at the door, hand upon the doorframe. ‘We still have plenty of time to plan a great holiday together. I am just going to ask Anna for time off school first. If no one has any objection…we might have to catch up on school work and stuff…’
‘Right’ Shannon fumbled. ‘Sorry…you’ve brought this on so suddenly. I haven’t had time to think about it…’
‘We can talk about it later. I’ll text you. Do you like trains?’
‘What?’
‘Take care my love’ Emilia blew a kiss to Shannon, before snapping the door shut.
Shannon sat in the abrupt silence, staring at the closed door, feeling very confused.
‘Aww Emilia’ she sighed. ‘What are you planning?’

A few weeks passed. It took a bit of convincing, but Anna eventually relented, allowing Emilia and Shannon time off from school. It was just a single weekend, but for Emilia, it was plenty of time.
'Doo doo doo doooo' Emilia patted her hands on her lap contentedly, staring out the window of the train, watching the world going by. 'This is nice. Isn't this nice?'
'This is very nice' Shannon smiled.
Emilia looked to Shannon, feeling a surge of love towards her.
'I like trains' Emilia said. 'There's something really peaceful about them.'
'Yeah' Shannon agreed. 'I like having our own compartment.'
'Hey' Emilia sat up, 'the food trolly should be coming soon. Are you hungry?'
'I am feeling a little hungry.'
'Want to play chess?'
'Where did that come from?'
Emilia stood, reaching to her bag in the compartment above their heads.
'I bought this ages ago' Emilia explained, 'back when I had a job. I saw it in one of the shops and it was super cheap, and like the wood so…'
She began to rummage around her bag for a little bit, before pulling out a little pouch and a wooden board.
'Here' she said, placing the board on her lap and opening the little cloth-pouch.
'Oh my god.' Shannon voiced abruptly.
'What?'
'What happened to your leg?'
She finally noticed hu?
'You mean the pins?'
'Oh my gosh…' Shannon moved off her seat, falling to her knees on the floor before her. 'Emilia!'
Shannon began to tear up.
'When did this happen?' Shannon sobbed.
'In the past.'
'I'm serious,' Shannon scolded. 'You're hurt.'
'I'm healing.'
Shannon wiped away at her eyes. 'I can't believe I didn't notice this…what happened?'
'Gravity.'
Shannon glared at her.
'Ok. Sorry. I just fell. I cracked my bone. It's gonna be pinned for quite a while.'
'I'm sorry' Shannon began to cry, hiding her face in shame and guilt. 'I can't believe I didn't notice.'
Emilia put the board and pouch aside, leaning forwards and embracing Shannon.
'I love you' Emilia cooed into her ear. 'I care more about you than anything. I just want you to be better.'
Emilia leant back, looking into Shannon's face.
'No' she said quickly, hushing Shannon before she could speak. 'I want to play chess with you. Do you want to be black or white? Remember white goes first.'

A few hours later, Emilia was staring out the window, arms crossed and expression sullen.
'Oh, stop sulking' Shannon said, trying to keep a straight face as she picked the fallen chess pieces from the floor. 'It's just a game.'
'It's just a game to you' Emilia grumbled, staring out the window still. 'I was looking forward to winning at least one game.'
'You were doing well overall' Shannon said, leaning back to sit on her heels, 'you just made a few obvious mistakes. It seemed you were trying to think so hard about what to do, the move after next, you weren't paying attention to your vulnerable pieces.'
'This is just like fencing with Gloria' Emilia muttered. She perked up suddenly. 'I beat her at least once. Now I know it's possible. And I can do it again.'
Emilia unfolded her arms, relaxing a little. She placed her hand on the seat beside her, leaning closer towards her girlfriend.
'We have to play again' Emilia said. 'I will defeat you. Like I defeated Gloria.'
'I'm not playing another game of chess. At least not today. You need to chill out.'
'I know I know' Emilia saved 'I need to plan my strategy, like a war General.'
'Whatever you say.' Shannon paused. 'I suppose you're going to say a quote of some sort?'
'Not one. But two. Here they go. Life is a long lesson in humility, and success is not final. Failure is not fatal. It is that courage to continue that counts.' Emilia looked Shannon in the eye. 'This isn't over' she said. 'I will defeat you in chess. We need to play again.'
'And you need to not take it so seriously' Shannon told her with a frown, collecting the final piece from the floor and putting it in the cloth bag. 'Seriously. You scare me sometimes.'
'Oooooohhh.' Emilia said, suddenly excited.
'Oh no.'
'Do you have any fears? How do you feel about the paranormal? Do you like horror?' Emilia clapped her hands. 'We could tell scary stories on the beach.'
'The beach?'
'Well yes. That's one of the places we're going to hang out and relax. You mean you still don't know where we're going?'
'Sorry' Shannon mumbled, rising from the ground and moving to sit beside her. 'I think you did tell me, but my mind has been other places.'
'That's ok. That makes it more of a surprise.'
'I'm sorry…it's not that I wasn't listening to you…'
'It's ok' Emilia said, putting her arm around Shannon's shoulder and pulling her closer. 'I will love you no matter how much you don't listen to me…'
Shannon leaned into her, hugging her back.
'So anyway' Emilia continued, 'about your biggest fears…'
'Hold on a second' Shannon interrupted. 'You mentioned the beach.'
'Yeah. The place we're going. It's very close to the beach. We're going to stay one night in a hotel. I got a lovely room with a nice beach view.'
'How did you afford that?'
'Well…' Emilia sighed, leaning back in her chair, drawing her arm back. 'That time I worked a lot…' she closed her eyes, 'you remember…?'
'Yeah…'
'I saved a lot of money. I didn't give it all to Sarah. I got some extra in tips too from the restaurant. And I have a little bit left over.' Emilia paused. 'I will have to get another job again soon' she spoke absentmindedly to herself. 'I wonder if I can work in my old job again.'

‘No.’
Emilia glanced to Shannon. ‘No?’
‘You work too hard. I don’t want you to have those fainting episodes again.’
Emilia stared at Shannon for a moment, before smiling with a sigh.
‘Sweet girl’ she said, patting her lovingly on the head. ‘You are so caring.’
‘Well of course’ Shannon said, slapping Emilia’s hand away. ‘I love you.’
‘And I love your green hair.’
‘What?’
‘Nothing.’
They were silent for a moment, looking at the fields outside.
‘So what made you want to go to the beach?’ Shannon asked.
‘Every anime has a beach episode’ Emilia said happily.
‘What?’
‘Nothing’ Emilia grinned. ‘We’re nearly there. It won’t be long now…’

About fifteen minutes later, the train reached the station.
‘This is our stop’ Emilia said, reaching for her bags. ‘Want me to carry anything.’
‘Nah. If anything I should carry stuff for you. You’ve got both legs that are….uh…’
‘Hey’ Emilia said snootily. Snatching Shannon’s bag from her. ‘I’m not invalid. I can still walk and carry stuff.’
Emilia pronounced the word invalid as: in VAL id.
‘Are you trying to say invalid?’ Shannon asked, pronouncing the word as: IN vuhlid.
‘Isn’t it interesting how some words are spelt identical yet pronounced completely different and have different meanings? English really is a mongrel language. Do you know why that is?’
‘Why?’ Shannon asked, knowing she was about to be educated, whether she like it or not.
‘English is made up of many other languages, and was brought to Britain by Germanic invaders long ago, borrowing words from other languages since its infancy. Other languages like French, Latin, and Germanic Languages like Dutch, Danish, and of course German.’
‘Fascinating’ Shannon said flatly. ‘Should we go? I kinda want some fresh air.’
‘Absolutely’ Emilia beamed, bouncing on the balls of her feet. ‘Ladies first? You can hold the door open for me.’

The hotel was very close to the train station, and the walk through the small town was pleasant. Shannon led the way, finding their path with the help of street-signs, while Emilia followed her lead, carrying a bag in each hand. Thankfully they weren’t heavy, so it was little trouble for Emilia. They were going away for only two days after all, just a weekend get-away, and one night in a hotel.
‘This is gonna be awesome’ Emilia cried out, unable to keep the excitement from her voice, unable to stop the squeak in her tone. ‘I can’t wait to pretend to be a turtle.’
‘What?’
‘I said I can’t wait to go rock-pooling.’

They found the hotel, were greeted by the receptionist, got their keys, and entered their room.

‘Aaaaaaah’ Shannon said, falling face-first onto the only bed. ‘This is nice.’
‘Don’t get too comfy’ Emilia said, placing the bags at the foot of the bed and moving over to the window, opening the sliding door onto the balcony and stepping forwards.
‘Aaaahhh’ she sighed, unable to stop herself. ‘I can smell the salty air.’
‘The sea air’ Shannon said, sitting up on the bed. ‘Is it nice out there? Can you see the beach?’
‘Yeah’ Emilia replied. ‘It looks gorgeous. The sand… the water…’
She turned back to Shannon with a sly smile. ‘Are you ready to go now?’
‘Absolutely’ Shannon said, leaping up from the bed.
Emilia stopped suddenly, a little surprised as Shannon bounded towards her, grasping her hands and giving her a peck on the lips.
‘I love you so much’ Shannon beamed. ‘Are you going to be ok with your legs?’ she asked, looking down at her. ‘Can you still swim?’
‘Of course I can’ Emilia huffed indignantly. ‘I can swim in the pool at school can’t I?’
‘But there are no currents in a pool.’
Emilia smacked Shannon lightly on the top of the head.
‘A fish can still swim without fins’ Emilia said.
‘It can?’
‘Yes. The muscles are in the fish’s body, not its fins.’
‘Oh, please stop trying to educate me.’
‘No’ Emilia said shortly.
Emilia moved past her, reaching down to her bag and rummaging through.
‘There’s plenty of shops around here’ she told Shannon. ‘We can buy a beachball or whatever we want.’
‘I’m getting excited’ Shannon said, clapping her hands, glancing back towards the ocean. ‘I want to get in the water.’
‘Good’ Emilia said, straightening up again, holding her own bag before her with both hands. ‘I’m glad you’re excited. This is gonna be awesome. We could get a nice meal on the way back. There’re tons of restaurants around here too. I’ve already got a bunch in mind. We can talk about it in the water. All that exercise we’re gonna get is going to make us hungry.’
Emilia strode towards the door, holding it open for Shannon.
‘After you, my lady.’
Shannon rolled her eyes, closing the sliding door to the balcony and making her way towards Emilia.
Emilia locked their room door and they walked side by side down the corridor, heading to reception.
‘You can swim, right?’ Emilia asked Shannon casually.
‘Of course I can swim. Hold on a second’ Shannon stopped suddenly. ‘Didn’t you nearly drown in the school pool?’
‘I didn’t nearly drown!’ Emilia said indignantly.
‘Keep your voice down’ Shannon hushed her.
Emilia glanced about. Thankfully there was no one else around.
Emilia looked back at her girlfriend.
‘Sarah tried to hold me underwater.’
‘That’s awful.’
‘Hardly’ Emilia laughed, waving her away. ‘It’s gonna take far more than that to kill me. I was in a car-crash you know?’

‘Right’ Shannon mumbled. ‘That’s how you lost your leg.’
‘Yes’ Emilia nodded, slipping her arm through Shannon’s and continuing to walk with her.
‘I am pretty sure I am a feline of some sort, within my soul I mean. I can’t remember how many lives I’ve got left, but it is a fair few.’
Emilia paused then, making an exaggerated face as she began to ponder.
‘Let me think. There was that time I nearly drowned when my mother pushed me into a lake. That time I survived the car-crash that took my leg…. oh, that time I fell from the roof and needed pins in my other leg…’
‘I don’t want to hear it I don’t want to hear it’ Shannon shook her head. ‘Hold on a second, you fell off the roof?!’
‘What?’
‘You never told me you fell off the roof.’
‘Can we pretend I never said this?’
Shannon supressed a sigh, continuing to walk.
‘Let’s just go’ she huffed.

The two of them headed out of the hotel, with Emilia carrying the single bag she brought with her. It was all she needed; it had her money in, her mobile, and some other miscellaneous things.
They weaved through the town gently, passing several shops until they saw one they liked more than the rest. Emilia and Shannon went inside, it was a typical beach-shop, and sold all the standard things one might expect. Cheap footballs in large net-bins, sandals and necklaces and sunglasses, blow-up rubber rings and sharks and nets and plastic buckets and hats and…
‘Oh look, ice-cream!’
‘Don’t point across me’ Shannon said angrily.
Emilia hurried towards the shop, pulling Shannon with her, the two hand-in-hand.
They spent about ten minutes or so in the shop. Emilia bought both of them a straw hat, some sun-cream, bikinis for each of them, a few plastic buckets and moulds and spades, upon Emilia’s insistence. And finally, a large blow-up rubber ring shaped like a unicorn, and ridiculously over-sized. But according to Emilia, it was perfect.
Shannon carried the bag of new belongings, while Emilia carried her own bag.
It was a short walk to the beach from the shop, and they each enjoyed an ice cream as they went, both finishing by the time they got there.
‘Oh wow’ Shannon said, shielding her eyes as the beach came into full-view.
‘It’s beautiful, isn’t it?’ Emilia said to her, reaching quickly into the bag Shannon carried, pulling out one of the straw hats and planting it firmly on Shannon’s head.
‘Oh. Thanks.’
‘There’s beach huts close to the water’ Emilia smiled, ‘I can go to the office to rent one for a few hours.’
‘Can you afford it? I don’t want to use all your money.’
‘Honey’ Emilia said, hugging her tightly, ‘money is for spending. Wait here, I’ll go book a hut.’

Shannon waited patiently for only a short time before Emilia returned to her side, dangling a key before her happily.
‘We got a teal-colour one’ Emilia grinned.

They went to find their hut, finally reaching the correct number. It was tiny inside, but cosy, with two deck-chairs, a little sofa-bed that folded out, a sink and some cabinets, and a beach-theme inside with neutral colours. Just outside there was a little deck, and just outside that, warm, soft sand.
'It's amazing' Shannon said. 'This is going to be the best holiday ever!'
Emilia turned to her, smiling.
I love you so fucking much….
Shannon noticed her looking, and turned to face her.
Emilia not-so subtly quickly moved her attention elsewhere.
'Hey look a seagull!'
Shannon only smiled, not looking at the bird.
'Emilia…'
She turned to look at Shannon.
'I'm glad I'm alive. And I'm glad I'm here with you.'
Emilia smiled widely, leaning forwards and kissing Shannon on the lips.
'I love you more than anything else in the world right now' Emilia said.
'Right now?'
'I mean…I love ice-cream too. Oh and I just remembered that I forgot to get us some towels.'
'What?'
'Let's get changed.'
They stepped into the hut, closing the door and curtains behind them.
After changing into their bikini's and admiring each other for a moment, they headed out to sea, Emilia locking the hut after them, the key she wore on a little bracelet at her wrist. It was held there firmly so she could swim with it, as the design intended.
Emilia took with her the blow-up unicorn-ring. She sat on the sand for a time, manually pumping it up, while Shannon took her first dip in the waters.
'It feels lovely!' she called back to Emilia, splashing at the water. 'Hurry up and come in!'
'I'll be there once I've done this' Emilia called back.
They took turns in blowing up the ring, then used it together, sitting on it at the same time, sitting on each other, or at least trying to, until Emilia popped it with the pins in her leg.
They watched it deflate dejectedly, and then Shannon laughed. Emilia replaced her false leg back onto her stump, she has been using it as a paddle to move about before the ring popped. It wasn't an effective way to travel, but it amused her.
They spent some time swimming without the unicorn-ring, before returning to the hut with it.
Emilia held a short funeral over the lifeless body of the unicorn, before saying a prayer and throwing the deflated-thing in a nearby bin. Then they made sand-castles together for a time before sunbathing.
'Do you think hell is really hot or really cold?' Emilia asked suddenly.
'I have no idea' Shannon sighed, lying on her front on the sand beside her.
'I should read The Divine Comedy' Emilia said.
'What's that?'
'It's also called Dante's Inferno.'
'Oh, *that* story. Doesn't he travel through hell to save the woman he loves?'
'I would do the same for you' Emilia mumbled to the sand.
'Mh-hm.'
Emilia sighed, closing her eyes again.

Dear mother in the deepest, darkest pit of hell. I hope you are either really really cold, or scorching hot. Either way, I hope it burns.
'Today, is a fantastic day…' Emilia said.
'It is…' Shannon replied.

As it began to get dark, the two packed up, changing back into their regular clothes and returning the key.
They wandered about the town for a bit, until they found a restaurant they liked, having a meal together there, feeling ravenous after their beach-adventures. They ate plenty, drank plenty, and had delicious deserts, staying at the restaurant for a long time, before making their way back towards the beach.
Emilia headed into one of the nearby shops, and bought some head touches for both of them, a net and a bucket.
They went rock-pooling for a few hours, before huddling together on the sand beside a little fire.
'You know what would be perfect right now?' Emilia asked.
'What?'
'A scary story.'
Shannon thought for a moment, before huddling further into Emilia.
'That sounds scary' Shannon mumbled.
'That's the point.'
'Alright then' Shannon said. 'Do you have a story in mind?'
'I do' Emilia said, resting her cheek against Shannon's head. 'Here it goes…'

Chapter 31.5

This story takes place within university grounds, in a location that has never been fully disclosed.
After some renovations to one of the buildings, strange things began to happen. Stories began to circulate about a part of the building being haunted, after a section of wall was torn down to make access to a set of stairs, previously blocked off for unknown reasons.
People who used these stairs began to go missing, and those that didn't, had a story to tell.
There was a single door, that when people approached or stood near, would cause a deep sense of dread and despair. Those that were brave enough to actually enter the door, would claim to find behind it, a set of stairs heading downwards, stairs, that were shrouded in darkness.
People for the most part, would stay away from these stairs, until one day, when the elevator broke down.
The number of being going missing, jumped, as did the mad ravings of those that survived. People began to become more afraid, some refuses to enter the building at all. People lost

friends and loved ones, eventually the entire building was condemned, but before it could be destroyed, a mysterious organisation made itself known.

The building was opened again, and members of the organisation went to the door, where strange noises could be heard. Banging and a faint shrill cry came from behind the door, that led to the haunted staircase.
And so, the unknown organisation began to study this anomaly.
A man was sent in, with a camera on his chest, and a radio in his ear. Behind the door, here is what they found.
There was an unlit platform staircase, which descended downwards.
It was unnaturally dark, and a soft child's cry could be heard, echoing up the metal stairs.
The crying sounded like it was coming from far down the staircase, and would speak the words:
Please help…down here…
The man exploring the staircase, descended even further, but despite this, the sound of crying never seemed to get closer.
And so, he continued downwards, until finally he saw a face.
It was vaguely human, with grey skin. There was no mouth, no nostrils, or pupils. But it was somehow clear to the man who stood, frozen with fear upon the staircase, that the face was making eye-contact.
He fled, crying with horror as he stumbled up the stairs, falling out the door and collapsing with exhaustion.
Everything he had seen, had been recorded on his device, the camera that was strapped to his chest, and had been watched by other members of the mysterious organisation, who had gathered in another room.

The second man to enter the door, was met with the same perpetual darkness as the one before had.
He too heard the crying, and as he descended, as the man before had experienced, he could not find the source of the sound, and no matter how many stairs he descended, the sound never seemed to come closer.
He continued down, reaching further than the man before him had. He observed damage to the walls and steps, damage that looked like it had been caused by extreme force. And it was here that the man experienced a sense of heightened fear, anxiety and paranoia. He sees the face, with no mouth, nostril, or pupils.
It charges for him, and the man runs.
He stopped only when his body collapsed with exhaustion, unable to go any further. When he did finally reach the door, crawling back to safety, he was sweating and shaking, his skin was paper-white. He became catatonic, and to this day remains unresponsive to all external stimuli, instead just staring ahead with a haunted expression, eyes wide, as if he were still there on those stairs, hearing the mysterious child's cry, seeing that face. He never recovered.

The third and final person to enter the staircase, never came out.
She went further than the two before her, and saw the face once again. It appeared inches away from her face without warning, terrifying her.
She ran, screaming, and fled, heading further and further down the stairs.

The camera and radio she carried soon lost signal, and went dark, as did the lights that had been placed at regular intervals down the stairs.
Darkness won out, and the stairs were cast once more into nothingness. Permanently.
The door leading to the stairs were bricked up, the building locked down, and separated from the rest of the school, fenced off and guarded all hours of the day.
No more lives were claimed by the unknown entity, but those that had been affected by it, either never fully recovered, or were never seen again.

Chapter 31 – continued

Shannon enjoyed the story very much, but it seemed to scare her a lot, and she clung to Emilia's arm as they headed back to their hotel room.
It was late by the time they got back, and Shannon and Emilia huddled together on the bed beneath the sheets. They made love that night, sleeping late, and waking late.
Upon waking, the first thing Emilia did, is shuffle closer to Shannon to hug her.
'Ow!'
'What is it?' Emilia asked alarmed.
'Your leg pins are stabbing me.'
'Oh… sorry.'
They left the bed very late in the morning, checking out and carrying their minimal possessions to the train station, and having a late breakfast nearby.
Emilia sat in one of the simple chairs at the small round table, sipping on the petite cup of tea and slurping loudly.
She paused, looking over the rim of her cup to Shannon, who giggled.
Emilia smiled knowingly at her.
They shared a croissant, and people-watched for a time, before catching the train.
They played a few rounds of chess, Emilia lost all games, sulked, was cheered up by Shannon, and spent the rest of the time in comfortable silence, watching the world pass by outside.

Finally, they reached their stop, taking a taxi back to the school.
Emilia and Shannon got out of the taxi, standing side by side and looking up at the school.
'It's good to be home' Emilia said.
She and Shannon shared a glance, and Emilia reached out to her, taking Shannon's hand in her own.

Life continued as usual, and Emilia and Shannon were happy. Their lessons continued as they had always done, and Emilia often gushed to her roommate about how wonderful her relationship with Shannon was going, and how much better Shannon was doing now.

Gloria would simply smile and nod, listening silently. And life was good.

Chapter 32

Weeks passed, and the end of the year was soon upon them.
The day of the party, or ball as some called it, finally came. Emilia took to calling it ‘the festival of fancy.’ She became greatly excited about the food that would be there, the drinks, and the music, and food.
Not to mention the food.
The students from the boy’s school arrived, and soon enough, the large hall set at the edge of the school grounds, and reserved for this occasion only, was finally opened, and bustling with activity.
The large hall was tucked away behind some trees, but conveniently close to the carpark, and the gardens too. And here is where Emilia stood, amongst the flowers and gazing towards the heavens.
‘The end of the year’ Emilia lamented, reaching out towards the stars overhead. ‘The year is over all too soon.’
‘Oh, come on now’ Shannon cooed, coming up behind her, ‘you said it yourself, live in the moment and all that. Look to the future, don’t linger in the past.’
Emilia dipped her head.
‘Emilia?’
Emilia turned abruptly, wrapping her arms around Shannon’s waist, lifting her up in the air.
Shannon squealed playfully, kicking her legs.
‘Put me down!’
Emilia obliged, placing her carefully back on the ground, before straightening again, smiling like a fool.
Shannon cupped her face, kissing her tenderly.
‘Now come back inside’ Shannon told her. ‘You’re cold. What are you doing out here anyway?’
‘Just looking at the stars’ Emilia said innocently. ‘I’m hungry by the way.’
‘That’s great. There’s food inside. Now come on. I won’t tell you again.’
They re-entered the hall. A little distance away, the wide foutain could be seen from that balcony, the one Emilia had seen when she first entered the school. The two stone dolphins, ever frozen in their joyful pose, leaping up, spraying water from their snouts, that rained down into the pool below.

They moved through the crowd slowly. It was odd having boys around, although some of the girls seemed to like it.
They passed a large mirror as they went, and Emilia caught a glance at their reflection.
Shannon wore a beautiful satin dress of chartreuse green, held up by straps. Emilia's dress was navy blue, and sparkled like the stars, the top running across her chest and leaving her shoulders bare.
'You look beautiful in your dress' Emilia voiced. 'I knew that you would.'
'You look beautiful too' Shannon gushed.
'Not as beautiful as you though' Emilia replied.
'No, you are more beautiful' Shannon giggled, pulling Emilia tighter.
'Oh god! Will you two just give it a break already?'
Gloria appeared beside them, wearing a disapproving frown. Her dress was knee-length, and sunflower-yellow, short-sleeved, with a square-cut neck.
'Your dress looks lovely' Emilia said.
Gloria put her hands behind her back, swaying shyly, closing her eyes and dipping her head.
'Thank you' she mumbled. 'You look nice too. Both of you.'

The party was in full swing, the music was upbeat, but not too loud, so the people could still talk at a reasonable volume and be heard. There was food being offered. Laid out on tables, and being offered around by waiters and waitresses who were hired for that occasion alone.
Everyone was dressed in the best clothes.
The girls wore beautiful dresses, and the boys wore suits, for the most part. There was one guy wearing an unusual garment which looked like a piece of both a suit and dress. At the top, it looked like a standard male suit, with long sleeves and a large bow at the neck, black in colour. The bottom part of the garment flowed out in a fabulous and voluptuous skirt.
Emilia's eyes lingered on this stranger as he walked past, taking in his features. This stranger walked with several other figures, both male and female.
'Really stunning.'
'What was that?' Shannon spoke up, looking up from her drink, food stuffed in her mouth.
Alongside the food, non-alcoholic drinks were on offer.
'Did you say something my darling?' Shannon said.
'Look at that man' Emilia said, not looking away. 'Isn't he lovely?'
Shannon tilted her head, strands of her green hair falling about her face.
'His dress is lovely' she said flatly.
Emilia turned to Shannon, taking the drink from her, pecking her on the cheek before taking a big sip.
Shannon huffed with mild irritation, reaching out to a passing waiter carrying fresh drinks, and helping herself to another.
After they were finished with their drinks, they moved to the dancefloor, dancing gently together in each other's arms. Emilia moved awkwardly, trying not to catch her pinned leg on anything. Shannon rested her head on Emilia's chest, closing her eyes contentedly.
Upon the balconies above them, other people watched and mingled. The kitchens in the back of the hall, where hot and busy, the double-doors left open for the workers to come back and forth. It was a warm, comfortable and peaceful atmosphere, and everyone was happy, even those working.

As Emilia and Shannon danced, Emilia saw a familiar figure a short distance away.
It was the gardener, Bootsie, dancing with one of the boys from the other school. Bootsie was the first-person Emilia had met upon first entering this school, all that time ago.
Her eyes roved over Bootsie, her hair, usually tied up as she worked, now spilled down her back.
I didn't realise it was so long…
Her dress was absolutely glamorous, and it was odd for Emilia to see her in a dress, and not her dirt-covered clothes. It was also odd to see her not in the garden, though she was still covered in flowers.
The dress Bootsie wore was pure white, the base of the skirt was bright-red with roses, and ambitiously frilled. Such vibrant colours, even the white colour was almost blinding.
Emilia's eyes travelled down, and she saw with great amusement, that the gardener was wearing wellies.
Typical Bootsie Emilia smiled to herself. *She's still colour co-ordinated.*
Her boots were red, like the base of her dress, and the same shade too.
Emilia looked away, towards the other guests who were dancing. And that was when she saw another figure.
She did not know this person, or had ever spoken to her, but she knew her from what she had learned from second-hand sources.
There was a woman, dancing with one of the men from the boy's school. She was missing both her arms from her forearms downwards, in their place were hooks instead.
'There she is.'
Shannon opened her eyes, looking up at Emilia.
'What are you saying now?'
'That woman over there, the one with hooks for hands' Emilia said quietly.
'What?' Shannon glanced around. 'Oh my…'
'Isn't her dress beautiful?' Emilia sighed.
'He's from the boy's school' Shannon mumbled, seeing the man the woman was dancing with.
'They've recently married' Emilia commented. 'That could be us someday.'
'They're married? How do you know?'
'The woman is Anna's friend' Emilia said. 'Anna has mentioned her before, just in passing. They're friends, and I heard she was recently married.'
Shannon looked back over to them. The couple were staring adoringly into one another's gaze.
'They look so happy together' Shannon spoke in a hushed voice, watching the two lovers dance. 'I wonder what their future holds.'
'Who could possibly say' Emilia said, sliding her hand down Shannon's back.
'No' Shannon scolded, 'not here.'
Emilia smiled slyly.
'You sly vixen' Shannon called her.
'Absolutely.'
They continued to dance, glancing towards the newlyweds, who only gazed at each other, as if the rest of the world did not exist to them. And perhaps at that time, it didn't.
'I wonder if they will have children' Shannon thought aloud.
'Well' Emilia said, 'whether they stay together or not, at least they are happy in the moment.'
'Why would you say that?'
'Oh come on' Emilia scoffed, 'statistically its more likely that…'

‘I don’t want to hear it I don’t want to hear it’ Shannon shook her head, hushing Emilia abruptly.
Emilia only smiled widely, taking Shannon’s hand in her own, and lowering it from her mouth as Shannon had tried to shush her.
‘Shannon’ Emilia, her tone becoming a little serious. ‘I want to tell you something.’
‘Are you breaking up with me?’
‘You wish’ Emilia teased. ‘You’re stuck with me I'm afraid.’
‘Oh no’ Shannon said dramatically, hand going to her forehead and beginning to feign pure shock and horror. ‘What ever will I do?’
Emilia caught her before she could fall backwards, holding her around the waist and Shannon leant back.
‘You’re very flexible you know that?’ Emilia teased.
‘You’re not so bad yourself.’
Shannon was about to say more, when Emilia suddenly slipped, falling forwards. She did not drop Shannon, instead fell on top of her.
‘Ah!’
‘Are you alright?’ Shannon asked.
‘I’m so sorry I dropped you’ Emilia said through gritted teeth.
She rolled onto her side, touching her leg lightly.
‘My poor pinned leg’ she lamented.
Shannon sat up. ‘I still feel so horrible for not realising you’d hurt yourself for so long.’
‘Eh’ Emilia shrugged.
Shannon rose to her feet, turning, she was about to reach out to help Emilia up.
Emilia, hardly paying attention, took the hand that was offered to her. But when she straightened up, after having been helped to her feet, she saw not Shannon holding her hand, but a man she did not recognise.
‘Uh. Hello’ she said.
Shannon stood nearby, wearing a surprised and amused expression, hand covering her mouth and eyes wide but smiling.
‘Who are you?’ Emilia asked the handsome boy.
‘I’m Ryan’ the handsome boy said, ‘I’m from the other school. I saw you on the floor and though maybe you needed some help.’
Emilia yawned loudly and obviously, pulling her hand gently back from the guy’s.
‘Thanks for your help, but I think you must be lost.’
Then without another word, she turned away, grabbing Shannon around the waist and pulling her along.

They went to a quiet corner together, sitting on a bench.
‘How’s your leg?’ Shannon asked Emilia, reaching to her and lifting her skirt to get a better look. ‘Oh, it looks so gruesome.’
‘I think it looks kinda cool’ Emilia said. ‘I look like a something out of a horror movie, or some weird sort of science experiment.’
Shannon just turned away, rolling her eyes.
‘So what did you want to tell me’ she said.
‘That couple’ Emilia said, ‘over there…’
Shannon looked towards the dancing pair, still lovingly within on another’s arms.

‘What about them?’
‘You wanted to know why she has hooks for hands?’ Emilia asked.
‘I feel like this isn’t going to be a nice story’ Shannon said, turning back to her.
‘No’ Emilia said. ‘But the ending, depending on how you look at it…well…I for one think it’s a happy ending. Despite what happened, she has made the best of it. The hand we get given in life is purely luck, but…what we do with our hand, is up to us.’
Shannon sighed, resting her chin on the palm of her hand, putting her elbow on a knee.
‘You’re always so positive’ Shannon sighed. ‘I can’t believe I almost made the worst mistake.’
‘Don’t think about it’ Emilia said. ‘You’ve been given a second chance, and that is a wonderful thing.’
Shannon smiled, eyes dropping to the floor.
‘Anyway’ Emilia said. ‘About that lady. Her name is Terry Vincent.

Chapter 33
‘My name is Terry Vincent, and a man tried to murder me’

Her story began in 1978, when she decided to hitchhike to reach her grandfather. She was far from anything she could call home, having an unstable childhood growing up and moving often. After her relationship with her boyfriend failed, she sought to travel back to her family, who lived far away.
Terry stood by the road holding a sign which read ‘heading south.’ There were other people with her who were planning on hitchhiking also.
After some time, a van pulled up beside her, and the driver offered her a lift. However, he said that he can only take one person, despite there being plenty of space in the back of the van.
The other hitchhikers strongly urged Terry not to go with the man, but Terry was desperate to get home, and so, against her own better judgement, she got into the van.
She trusted the driver, who was an older and friendly-looking man, because he reminded her of her grandfather. The one she was travelling to see.
They drove for a time, and everything seemed fine, until he touched her neck, asking her if she was sick because she sneezed. She felt suddenly uncomfortable, drawing back.
He continued to drive, and Terry, though initially a little scared and uneasy at the unwanted touch, slowly began to feel a little more relaxed. Tired, she let herself sleep.

When she woke, she found out that they were going the wrong way, feeling angry and frightened, she began to threaten the driver, demanding him to go the right direction.
And so, he turned around. Apologising and saying how it was a mistake.
Eventually they made it to a rest stop. Terry was feeling a little uneasy again.
The driver got out of the van to take a bathroom break, Terry got out too, to tie her shoe lace, in case she needed to run.
She bent down to tie her shoe, but before she could stand up again, she was hit with a sledge-hammer on the back of the head, and was knocked out, completely unconscious and helpless.

Terry woke in the van again, this time she was tied up, completely unable to escape, even if left alone.
He tortured her all night
She begged for her life, asking to be set free, and he told her that he would set her free.
The man used a hatchet, and hacks away at her arms.
Both of them. He then threw her down the cliff, and stuff her into a concrete pipe.
The man then says to her 'now you are free.'
He left, believing that he had committed the perfect crime. And Terry lay there in the concrete pipe, bleeding out.
But Terry was not ready to give up, and one thought remained to her:
How terrible it would be if she let this man commit the same crime against another.
And so, she dragged herself out of the pipe, and up the cliff, packing her bleeding stumps with mud and leaves to help stop the flow of blood.
She remembered words her mother spoke to her a long time ago when she was younger, when she had cut her finger. Her mother told her to 'hold the injury it above your heart to slow the bleeding.' And that is what she did.
Holding her arms above her head, she crawled up the hill, heading back to the road.
She walked in this state, for an agonizing three miles, before someone stopped for her.
She was found by a couple driving. They were on their honeymoon, but they weren't even supposed to be at this location, having taken a wrong turn.
Terry had already lost more than half the blood in her body. Doctors removed part of her leg in order to save what was left of her right arm.
Her dream was to become a dancer, but because of what happened, this was no longer possible.
It took years for her to recover to the point she felt she could leave her house, suffering severe mental issues due to the attack.
Her would-be killer was found and sentenced, receiving only a short fourteen years in prison, which was the maximum at the time, though even the judge said he would give a higher sentence if he could.
Terry testified against him, to ensure he was put away. And he fought back, denying the claims, saying that she was a sex-worker, and that it was she who threatened him in the first place.
As Terry left the courtroom, she walked past the man, who whispered to her. 'If it's the last thing I do, I will finish the job.'
This terrified her.

She struggled to find a job due to her disability, but still she continued to fight on, going into hiding for a time, developing anorexia.
Terry eventually found love and married; however, they ended up going their separate ways.
The marriage resulted in two sons, who Terry loved dearly.
Meanwhile, her would-be killer, tells his own version of the story in jail, blaming Terry.
He was released early due to good behaviour, and got out after only serving eight years.
He becomes a free man, moving back to his hometown.
Terry upon hearing this was devasted, as were the public.
The would-be killer lives his life, acting like a normal, even nice man, being the dream neighbour. Some thought that maybe he was framed. One woman, not knowing of his past, let the man's puppy play with her young daughter, while she and her husband spoke with the man.

The man tries to end his life by carbon monoxide poisoning in his car, but he survived. He even wrote a suicide note.
He was taken to a psychiatric centre for a time before being released. Despite this, he lived a mostly normal life, until one day he committed another crime.
Twenty years after attacking Terry, he attacks another woman, this time killing her.
A painter looks through his window, and sees him beating and strangling a woman. The painter runs to find police, who storm the house. They quickly find the dead body of the woman. Mother of three, Roxanne.
She had been stabbed many times.
The man tries to blame the woman, claiming to be depressed and intoxicated. Claiming self-defence.
Upon hearing the news of this woman's death, Terry appears in court again to testify against him. Despite being so afraid, despite hiding from him for so long and moving house so many times. Thanks to her testifying against him again, he is sentenced to death row.
The man claims that, while he is guilty for this crime, he is innocent of the last with Terry, saying, 'I was framed the first time.'

Years later he dies from cancer, before his execution could be carried out. He was aged seventy-four.

Terry was finally able to live free of fear. She loved to cook, became an artist, and raised her two sons. Despite what happened, despite her disability, she never let it stop her.

Terry Vincent was just fifteen years old when the attack happened.
She fought so hard, because she didn't want this to happen to anyone else.
She is an incredibly brave woman, and her story is truly inspiring.

Chapter 34

'Wow' Shannon breathed, 'that's unbelievable.'
'It is.'
'How do you know all of this?' Shannon asked.
'Her story is public. There's even a book about her' Emilia smiled, pulling the book from behind her.
'You've been carrying that around all night?'
'No, I hid it behind this bench' Emilia explained. 'I knew we were going to have this conversation. Anna told me Terry would be here. I got this book from the library.'
'You are such a strange person' Shannon said.

‘Ha ha. I’m glad you think so.’ Emilia paused. ‘I feel like now would be a great time to quote someone, but I got nothing right now.’
‘Then just kiss me.’

Emilia glanced over Shannon’s head to the clock on the wall behind her, letting out a sigh.
‘Is that the time already? I should be going soon; I have chores to do.’
‘Aww’ Shannon huffed. ‘Do you *have* to go?’
‘I’m afraid so. I will only get in more trouble if I’m late.’
‘I can’t believe you have to work on a night like tonight.’
‘It’s not so bad’ Emilia said. ‘I just have to serve food and drink. I don’t have to get out of my dress or anything. But Anna is watching. She’s still mad about what I did in the library.’
Shannon huffed again. ‘Fine’ she said sulkily. ‘I guess that’s ok.’
‘Don’t worry’ Emilia said to her. ‘Things work out best for those who make the best of how things work.’
‘Is that another one of your quotes?’ Shannon asked.
‘John Wooden’ Emilia winked, naming the man whom she had quoted. ‘Anyway. I should go now.’
‘Just one more hug’ Shannon said, pulling Emilia to her again and holding her tight.
Emilia sighed, holding Shannon back. ‘Just one more hug’ she said. ‘Just for a minute.’

Gloria glanced over towards Emilia and Shannon, wrapped in each other’s arms.
There was a great smile upon her face, as she watched the loving couple.
‘Despite all the hardships…’ Gloria said, staring at Emilia, ‘just like a dandelion in concreate…you thrive…’
Emilia turned towards Gloria, as if sensing her watching. She grinned widely, before turning back to Shannon, kissing her on the lips.
Shannon blushed, kissing her back.
Gloria heard them speak together.
‘I love you Emilia’ Shannon said.
‘I love you more’ Emilia replied. ‘My little cabbage.’

Note from the author 1/3:

I am only doing as well as I am today thanks to the people around me. I suffer from depression, and anxiety, PTSD, and have a history of self-harm. At this time of writing in March 2023, I am medicated for my issues, and have been to therapy. Which helped greatly.
I have had plenty of suicidal fantasies in my life, and spent a lot of my childhood (about 11-19 years old) wishing for death due to my abusive father. I would wish to die nearly every other day and hated my life at the time. The only reason I didn't end my life like my mother did (when I was 9-10 years old) was because I knew it wasn't the right thing to do. I still love her and do not blame her for what she did.
She was suffering from mental health issues herself and didn't get the help she needed.

I am sharing this in an attempt to help others who may be suffering from poor mental health or having other difficulties in life.
Please seek help, you are NOT alone, you DO matter. There ARE better days ahead.
Reach out. The right people will be there for you. The right people will understand.

Be kind to others, and don't forget to be kind to yourself too.

Note from the author 2/3:

The character Terry Vincent within this story, is a real person, whose real name is Mary Vincent. Her story is true and accurate, though I changed a few details to fit her within my story.

Mary Vincent was born in 1963 and became a victims advocate after surviving a violent encounter while hitchhiking in 1978, where both her arms were cut off by her attacker, whose name does not deserve to be remembered.

Despite what happened, Mary Vincent did her best to continue living life to the fullest. She has two sons and began a career in arts.

More information can be found about her online.

In a world where there is much pain and evil, be a Terry Vincent, who became an advocate to help others, and made the best of her situation despite the difficulties she suffered, both mental and physical, and fought hard to help make the world a better place.

Quotes from the story

'If you want peace, prepare for war' – Vegetius (Roman General)

'If you have a garden and a library, you have everything you need' – Marcus Tullius Cicero (Roman philosopher and politician)

'I destroy my enemies when I make them my friends' – Abraham Lincoln (16th president of the United States)

'Success is walking from failure to failure with no loss of enthusiasm' – Winston Churchill (British Prime Minister from 1940 to 1945)

'You miss 100% of the shots you don't take' – Wayne Gretzky (Canadian ice-hockey player)

[Quoted twice in story]

'The question isn't who is going to let me; it's who is going to stop me' – Ayn Rand (Russian-born American writer and philosopher. Died 1982)

‘The greatest glory in living, lies not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall’ – Nelson Mandela (first president of South Africa from 1994-1999)

‘Time waits for no one’ – the earliest record of this phrase is dated 1225, before English was shaped in modern form.

‘Life is a long lesson in humility’ – James M. Barrie (Scottish novelist and playwright, best remembered as the creator of Peter Pan. Died in 1937)

‘Success is not final; failure is not fatal. It is the courage to continue that counts’ – Winston S. Churchill (British Prime Minister from 1940 to 1945)

‘Things work out best for those who make the best of how things work out’ – John Wooden (American basketball coach and player)

Note from the author 3/3:

Linked story which may be written in the future – a yaoi called:

Boy meets_

Story takes place in the boy’s school nearby the girl’s school that is the centre of this story (Paint it RED!)

(As of February 2023, this second story is merely an idea, with no due date in mind)

Before-Story

Emilia's childhood

It was Emilia's tenth birthday, and she was having so much fun.
She woke up early, feeling super-excited for the day. Running down the stairs, opening her presents and eating chocolate cake for breakfast.
Now she was at a fun fair with her father, running around and looking at all the brightly coloured things, the rides and the stalls and all the candy and toys.
'Emilia!' her father called.
'Daddy! I'm over here!' she waved enthusiastically. 'Come here come here!'
Her father approached her, weaving through the crowd.
'Emilia' her father said to her sternly. 'How many times do I have to tell you to stop running off?'
'Daddy, can I have some cotton candy?'
'Emilia.' Her father said again. 'Did you hear what I said?'
The young Emilia turned to face her father, holding her hands slyly behind her back, and grinning guiltily.
'Yes?' Emilia cooed.
'Stop running off, okay?'
'Okay.'
'You promise?'
'Yes!' Emilia grinned, excited now.
'Ok' her father said to her calmly. 'I'll get you some cotton candy.'
And so he did. And then he bought her some ice cream, and a little later they shared some fish and chips, and then more ice cream, and they went on a few more rides together. Then Emilia asked for a big bag of sweets. Which he bought her.
'Don't tell your mother I've bought you so many sweets, ok?' her father laughed awkwardly. 'I'm starting to worry you won't sleep tonight.'
'I'll never tell her a thing' Emilia grinned cunningly. 'Want one of these red things?'
'What flavour is it?' her father asked.
'I don't know its red.'
Her father just smiled, taking the sweet offered to her and eating it.
'Mmm. It's good.'
Emilia suddenly leant into him; arms wrapped around his torso.
'I love you daddy!'
'I love you too Emilia.'

Emilia went home with a giant fluffy unicorn that day. It was pink, with a big sparkly horn and tiny little wings.
It was so cute, and Emilia loved it so much.
'I'm going to treasure this forever' Emilia said, holding it up above her. 'Thank you so much for getting it for me.'

‘Emilia, can you please put that down’ her father told her. ‘It’s distracting, I need to be able to see the road clearly.’
Emilia obliged quietly, setting the unicorn down on her lap and stroking its mane lovingly.
‘I shall call you…Sherbert…’ she whispered to it.

They got home shortly after this, and Emilia leapt out of the car.
As her father had requested, she left whatever sweets she hadn’t eaten yet, hidden in the back of his car.
‘I’ll come back for you’ she muttered to them through the window, before turning away from the car.
Emilia skipped towards the front door of her home, hugging Sherbert to her.
‘That was so fun daddy’ Emilia said back to her father, as he marched behind her. ‘Thank you for taking me out today.’
‘It was my pleasure’ he grinned to her, patting her head tenderly. ‘I’m glad you had fun. I had fun too.’
‘I’m gonna remember this day forever’ Emilia said. ‘This was the best day ever!’
Her father paused then, staring at her for a moment, his eyes crinkling at the edges.
He put his arm around her, squeezing her tightly for a moment before kissing her on the cheek.
‘Come on’ he said to her quietly. ‘Get inside. Dinner should be ready soon.’
Emilia giggled happily, darting forwards and bursting through the door, running down the entrance hall of her home.
‘Emilia take your shoes off!’
She stopped abruptly, reaching down to her feet.
Moments later her shoes sailed through the air, landing messily in a pile near the front door.
‘Emilia’ her father scolded.
‘Love you daddy!’ Emilia called back without looking around.
She hurried up the stairs to her room, eager to play with and look at the presents she had received that morning.
She passed the doorway to the kitchen, stumbling up the stairs in her eagerness to get to her room.
Moments later, her mother stepped out of the kitchen, staring towards her father.
Her arms were folded, and she wore a serious expression.

Emilia played in her room for hours, having all the fun in the world.
The evening began to grow late, and she paused after a time, looking towards her window.
It was getting darker outside.
Her tummy rumbled. She was hungry.
Emilia put down the kaleidoscope she was playing with, lying on her back on her bed, half her body nearly dropping off the bed.
She began to wonder why she had not been called downstairs for dinner. It *must* be ready by now.
Maybe she *was* called but she didn’t hear.
Emilia began to worry that she might have missed out on desert.
Emilia rolled the right-way up, dancing across her bedroom. She opened the door and called downstairs.
‘Daddy?!’
There was no response.
Emilia hummed to herself.
That was weird. She thought.

Emilia moved away from the door, making her way downstairs, her ears straining for any sound she might hear.
But there was nothing.

Emilia went to the kitchen, finding her mother there.
She looked around, seeing no food on the table. Seeing no sign of her father.
Only her mother was there, sitting alone at the table, drinking from a bottle, that thing Emilia wasn't allowed to drink.
'Where's daddy?' Emilia asked.
Her mother didn't reply, only took the bottle, pouring more of the red liquid in the round glass.
She took a big swig.
'Natasha' Emilia said, addressing her mother by name, as was typical for her.
'What?' her mother said tiredly.
'Where's daddy?'
Natasha just sighed in annoyance.
'I don't know' she said dismissively, drinking from the glass again.
'When did you see him last?' Emilia asked.
Natasha sighed again, turning in her chair to face her daughter.
'I don't know' she said again, her tone becoming more irritant. 'He just went away. Don't ask me where.'
'Well…when is he coming back?' Emilia asked sullenly.
Natasha pushed her phone towards Emilia, her chair screeching on the floor as she rose abruptly.
'Just text him.' She told Emilia shortly. 'I'm going to my room. Don't bother me or I'll be annoyed.'
Emilia didn't look at her mother as she walked past her, through the doorway and up the stairs to her own room.
Instead, Emilia just stared at the phone.
She took her mother's mobile, lifting it before her and searching for her father's name.
Emilia found it. There were very few texts between her mother and father.
Emilia began to type.

Daddy, it Emilia here. Where did yougo? xxx

She never received a reply.
She sent a few more texts, but as far as she could tell, he never read the messages.

He came back the next day. Emilia woke in the morning, waking late, having gone to bed late.
She had cried herself to sleep, consumed by worry for her father.
She woke abruptly upon hearing her father's voice.
Emilia jumped out of bed, running down the stairs and into the kitchen.
'Daddy!'
She threw herself into him, wrapping her small arms around him.

‘Where were you!? I was so worried!’
Her father, did not hug her back, merely patted her on the shoulders, gently pushing her away.
‘I’m sorry Emilia’ he said to her. ‘I just had to do some things.’
Emilia felt a little confused, and then she felt a little hurt.
Why hadn’t he hugged her?
He looked upset, but seemed to be trying to hide it.
‘Did I do something to upset you?’ Emilia asked. ‘I’m sorry.’
‘No no’ he said hastily. ‘You haven’t done anything wrong.’
‘Then what is it?’
He did not reply, simply stared blankly at the table.
‘Daddy?’
‘Don’t call me that.’
His tone was sharp. Was angry.
Emilia was so thrown off by this, she wasn’t even able to feel anything else.
Not hurt, only confusion this time.
‘You should go back to your room’ he told her.
‘But….’ Emilia spoke feebly. ‘I…’
‘Just go to your room’ he spoke to her.
It was unmistakable. There was anger in his tone.
Emilia turned and ran away, heading back upstairs.
She was confused, and hurt, but mostly confused.
Emilia sat on her bed, crying silently to herself.
‘I haven’t even had breakfast’ she mumbled to herself.

That was the last time she had ever seen the man she once called father.
Later that day, she learned he had left again. Only this time, he never came back.

‘Where is he?’
‘Emilia’ Natasha snapped angrily back. ‘Stop asking me stupid questions. I’m trying to enjoy my meal dammit.’
‘Where is he?! Where is daddy!’
‘He’s not your fucking father!’
‘What?’ Emilia gasped.
‘He is *not* your father.’ Natasha reiterated.
‘…What?’ Emilia said again, unable to think of anything else to say.
‘You heard me.’
‘But….’ Emilia trailed off. ‘I don’t understand.’
‘Emilia’ Natasha said shortly. ‘If you’re not going to eat your food, just go to your room. You’re getting on my nerves.’
Emilia ran from the table at that. She didn’t need to be told again.
Emilia felt utterly heartbroken, confused, guilty.
It *must* have been something she had done wrong. It *must have*.
But at that age, Emilia could not possibly have understood her mother, nor her unfaithful, lying ways.
In years to come however, Emilia’s mind slowly began to piece things together, and things gradually began to make more sense.
As she grew and matured, she began to understand.

Just over a year later, Natasha brought a man home.
‘Um…. who’s this?’ Emilia asked.
He had simply walked into their home, as if he’d been there before, it was likely that he had.
‘Emilia’ Natasha said, coming up behind the man. ‘This is a friend of mine.’
Emilia stared at the unremarkable man. She moved the spoon to her mouth again, continuing to eat her cereal slowly.
‘Emilia, don’t be rude’ Natasha snapped.
‘What do you want me to say?’
‘Say hello.’ Her mother told her. ‘This is ~~~~.’
‘Oh ok.’
‘Say hello Emilia’ her mother ordered.
‘Hello ~~~~~.’
‘Hey’ he said back to her with a wave.
Emilia continued to eat her cereal.
‘Emilia’ Natasha said, ‘why don’t you go out and meet your friends, we’ve got things to do here.’
Emilia turned to the kitchen window, seeing the rain patter against the glass from outside.
‘But it’s raining.’
‘Do as I say’ Natasha snapped. ‘I’m tired of your attitude.’
Emilia simply sighed, rising from the table, and walking away, leaving her snack where it was.
She walked down the hallway.
As soon as she stepped out of the front door, Natasha snapped it shut behind her.
And then Emilia heard the very distinct sound of the door locking from the inside.
‘What?’
She tried the door briefly, trying to get back in.
Yup. It was locked.
‘Natasha?’ Emilia called to her mother. ‘Did you just lock me out? You know it’s still raining out here? Natasha!’
But there was no response.
Emilia turned around, facing the street ahead of her.
She stood there, looking about and contemplating, not only what she should do, but what the heck just happened.
Emilia didn’t mention the fact that Natasha seemed to have forgotten her eleventh birthday. Either that, or she just didn’t care.
It was probably both.
Emilia stood for a few moments longer, wondering what to do.

A few years passed.

Emilia tried asking about her father.
She wanted to know who he was. Why he wasn’t in her life. Did he care about her? Did he even know she existed?
Emilia would ask many times, and every time she did so, Natasha’s patience became shorter and shorter.
Eventually, the two would dissolve into screaming matches. But no matter what, Natasha never told the truth. And Emilia never knew who her father was.

More time passed, and Natasha would bring various men home over the years.
She would tell Emilia various lies and half-truths about all sorts of things. So many things, that Emilia lost track of them.
In the end, Emilia decided that none of whatever her mother told her even mattered anymore.

More time passed.

One day, Emilia was reading poetry in her room quietly, minding her own beeswax.
Suddenly there was a ruckus coming from downstairs.
Emilia sighed wearily, putting her book down and staring with tired-eyes towards her bedroom door.
She knew some nonsense was likely about to occur.
Her mother had just come home, late of course, from who-knows-where.
And of course, she had another man with her.
Of course.
Emilia sighed, trying to focus on her book. But that became impossible.
Natasha and her companion stomped loudly up the stairs.
Emilia was just wondering if it was worth leaving her bed to close the door, when the two of them stumbled past.
'Oh. You're here' Natasha said.
'Yes?' Emilia said.
Natasha giggled, leaning into the man beside her.
'Have you been drinking?' Emilia asked.
'What's it to you?' Natasha retorted.
Emilia sighed, lifting the book again to cover her face, hoping her mother would get the hint and go away.
Of course she didn't.
'Emilia. Are you trying to ignore us? That's rude.'
'No' Emilia droned.
'Emilia.'
She dropped the book sullenly, staring towards her mother with dead-eyes.
'Emilia' Natasha said, glancing towards the man who helped support her. She was practically clinging to him. 'This is your new father.'
'Oh' Emilia said, lifting the book again.
Natasha scowled at her daughter's lack of reaction, turning to speak to the man instead.
'Don't mind her' Natasha told him. 'She's just a moody teenager. You know what they're like. Let's just leave her.'
They went away together. As soon as they were out of sight, Emilia left her room, heading out the door.
She didn't want to hear what they would get up to. She didn't want to deal with their distraction.
All she wanted to do now was to sit quietly and read.
Sit quietly, and not be irritated by her so-called mother.
'What kind of a parent is she?' Emilia muttered to herself, striding away from her home. 'What kind of a mother….' She cursed to herself under her breath. 'I'm more mature than she is…'
Emilia went away. It was only a walk of about ten minutes or so. She went to a quiet place.

There was a park near her home, with a little section of forest where people would do peaceful things, like yoga, which they did sometimes in groups on nice days, or cycling, or walking their dogs, or having picnics with their families and loved ones.
It was a lovely scene, and Emilia desired only to be here now.
'I didn't realise it was such a nice day' she mumbled to herself, looking at the beautiful blue sky overhead. 'I should have been out here sooner.'
Emilia felt a twinge of jealously and bitterness at the sight of a family nearby. A traditional family, parents, with two young children and a little dog, an excited puppy running around yipping.
Emilia's attention lingered on this small group. She felt her heart sink a little. She felt briefly, a sensation of anger, and sadness in equal amounts. She felt resentful at the injustice and unfairness of it all.
The older child, there were two daughters, was cycling around her family in circles. The father was playing tug with the little puppy. It looked like a corgi. And the mother was helping support the younger daughter, who appeared to be learning to ride a bike still.
Both girls wore pink helmets, and had knee and elbow pads strapped on.
If they were to fall, the plastic and cushion would protect them.
Emilia had not learned to ride a bike until she was much older. Her friends and their older siblings had taught her. It had been a fun day, despite the initial awkward questions and silent judgements from those around her at the time.
Emilia turned away sharply, rubbing her eyes.
She went to a secluded spot, where there was a single swing beneath a tree.
She saw to her relief that it was not occupied, and so she went over to sit on it.
Protected from the sun by the leafy canopy above, Emilia began to swing gently back and forth, arms around the rope that held the little wooden seat up. The poem-book held in both her hands.
She delved back into this world within these pages. Seeing from the perspectives of the writers, of all these separate poems.
She loved this, and in no time at all, she forgot her worries.

Emilia only stopped reading when she began to feel a little chilly. She lifted her head, observing her surroundings.
The sun was dipping, it was growing late in the day.
'Dammit.'
Emilia leapt to her feet, hurrying through the park, heading back the way she had come.
She asked a random passer-by the time, thanking this person, before continuing on her way, picking up her pace.

When she got home, she found the strange man still there. His stupid shoes were still in the hallway.
'Natasha!' Emilia called up the stairs. '*NATASHAAAA*!'
Her mother appeared at the top of the stairs a few moments later.
'What the hell do you want?!'
'I'm late for my gymnastic lesson' Emilia fumbled.
'Oh for gods sake' Natasha said.
Emilia rushed up the stairs, past her mother and into her bedroom. She began rummaging around, searching for her gymnastic costume, hairbrush, and a few other miscellaneous things she would normally take with her, including her mobile which was left on her bed. She shoved them all her small purple bag, stepping back into the hallway and looking around for her mother.
She heard the front door slam, looking towards it and seeing the weird man's shoes were gone.

‘He’s left’ she mumbled to herself. ‘Thank god.’
Her mother came out of her own bedroom then, storming towards her.
‘What the hell are you doing?!’ Natasha demanded.
‘What?’ Emilia breathed, confused at her reaction.
‘You’ve always got to ruin everything’ her mother snapped.
Emilia’s expression turned cold.
‘Are you serious? What kind of mother are you? You’re supposed to look after me. You do know that right?’
‘Don’t you dare criticize me you little bitch.’
‘Bitch?’
‘It’s your fault all these men leave’ Natasha snapped.
‘We’re talking about this again?’
‘You’re nothing but a hassle to me.’
‘*I’m* a hassle to *you*?’ Emilia snarled. ‘Do you know what it’s even *like* living with you? I don’t even want to fucking be here.’
Natasha slapped her then.
It came so suddenly, so unexpectedly, and it hurt.
Emilia’s eye watered, her cheek stung, and she turned back to face her mother, hand to her face, tears brimming.
‘I wish I’d never had you. You’re nothing but a burden. I just want to live my life.’
‘You should have thought about that before you got knocked up.’
Natasha grabbed Emilia by the side of her head, slamming it against the wall.
Emilia was disorientated, the white light momentarily blinding her with pain.
Natasha was yelling at her, but Emilia could not understand what she was saying.
Her mother continued to yell at the top of her voice, still holding Emilia by the hair.
Emilia opened her mouth.
‘Who’s my father?’
‘He’s dead.’
‘You keep saying that but I don’t believe you. If you weren’t such a whore sleeping around all the time maybe you’d know yourself.’
And that is when Natasha threw her. Still holding her tightly, she flung Emilia aside.
Emilia fell down the stairs.
It all happened so fast. All she remembered was gravity, blunt-force trauma, and pain.
Emilia landed at the bottom of the stairs awkwardly.
She hurt all over.
She hurt all over, but mainly in her leg.
Emilia looked down her body, seeing her bone protruding through her skin.
‘*You’ve broken my leg!*’ Emilia cried out in panic. ‘Oh my god!’

Months passed, and this event was completely forgotten about.
Emilia of course had fallen down the stairs herself by accident, being clumsy as she was.
In the end Emilia never got to go to her gymnastic class, and Emilia kept her mouth shut.

It was sometime after this, long after Emilia's leg had healed and she no longer needed a cast, and her muscles had regained their strength again, that she attended a friends birthday party.
It was a large gathering. This particular friend of hers was a social butterfly, and seemed to have all the friends in the world. And everyone adored her.
This friend liked to do things big, her family were very well-off financially, and on this particular birthday of hers, like those before, her family went all out.
They rented a large venue, a limo, hired a DJ. Everyone had so much fun, and wore beautiful dresses and fancy and excessive makeup, while others wore masks, some with great feathers. Everyone's identities were partially hidden to some degree. It was fun, mysterious, and the food was amazing.
Natasha of course had to ruin it for Emilia.
'I don't care' Emilia snarled angrily as her mother dragged her along by her wrist. 'I'll never be hateful like you, no matter what you do to me. I will *never* treat others this way.'
'Oh shut up with your constant whining' Natasha retorted, continuing to drag her along.
They were outside the venue now; Emilia being forcibly taken against her will.
'I was really enjoying the song' Emilia mumbled, staring longingly behind her.
Natasha didn't respond to this, but continued to pull her along, the park around them was peaceful otherwise.
They were approaching a bridge, a little bridge, arching over a river where ducks were minding their own.
'I'm not going to have my daughter messing around with a bunch of strange guys.'
'You're one to talk.'
Emilia was hit again for talking back.
'Stop hitting me. Why do you even care what I do!'
'It looks bad on me' Natasha snapped.
'You don't need me to help you with that.' Emilia looked around. 'You're creating a scene.'
'You're going to an all-girls school' Natasha snarled under her breath, perhaps in an attempt to draw less attention to their predicament. 'A respectable one.'
'You wouldn't be able to afford that' Emilia muttered.
But her mother heard her loud and clear.
'You have no idea what I can afford. You have no idea about me.'
Emilia jerked her wrist back, coming to an abrupt stop.
They were standing in the middle of the bridge now.
Natasha rounded on her daughter, snarling at her like a wild beast.
'Why are you so angry?!' Emilia cried. 'What is your dam problem?! It's your fault I don't know anything about you! You've never treated me like a daughter. All my life you've treated me like nothing but an inconvenience. Sorry for existing. Sorry for being a burden to you. Sorry for being your daughter. Sorry you're forever absent. Sorry you're such a useless mother.'
And that was when Natasha pushed her, completely losing her temper.
Emilia fell in the river.
The water was deep, and the heavy folds of her dress pulled her downwards.
Emilia felt the panic rising within her, struggling to make her way to the riverbank.
The makeup that covered her face immediately began to run, seeping down her face, giving her almost a ghostly look, even more so as she tries her best to crawl out of the water.
But her mother who had walked off the bridge and around to the bank to meet her, only pushed her further into the water, attempting to hold her head beneath the surface.
It was this specific moment, that Emilia developed her fear of water.
She was rescued however. Her mother's grip was strong, but her friends who weren't far behind, had come to help her. They pulled Natasha away, while others ran to help Emilia out of the water.

Emilia was distraught, coughing violently, shaking and crying.

This memory was so traumatic, that Emilia forgot about it, almost instantly, almost entirely.
But the lingering fear of water still remained, always present.
It never left her.

Years later, Emilia still lived with her mother. They had moved house more than once in that time due to work reasons. And various other reasons, mainly ones that Emilia was not aware of.
Her mother was still a stranger to her. And Emilia was fine with that.
Natasha had found a new man of course, shortly after they settled into their most recent home. He seemed nice enough, though Emilia wouldn't allow herself to get attached to him. The relationship between him and Natasha was sure to last only a short time. It would either run its course, as the many others before had, or they would move again. Either way, Emilia had accepted long ago that this is how things were for her. This is the life she lived. Unstable relationships, new homes, losing friends, making new ones, and uncertain tomorrows.
This is just how things were.

Today, Emilia was spending time with Natasha's latest interest. It had been only a short time but he had already moved in and was living with them. Emilia was alright with this. He was nice enough, and had begun to teach Emilia how to skateboard. He was a bit of an expert, and Emilia felt she had learned a lot in a short space of time.
She actually liked this new man, and enjoyed the time they spent together. Though she knew it would not last, and so she made the most of every single day.
She used his skateboard the first few times they went out, then one day he bought one of her very own, and she was very happy, positively over the moon.
They spent a lot of time at the skateparks, in different locations. Sometimes driving a long distance to experience new ones.
When the relationship between this new man and Natasha met its inevitable end, Emilia still treasured the memories and the fun they had had together.
She would remember them fondly, and she would continue to skate. Until the day her mother took that away from her, because of course she did.
Apparently, Natasha had gotten fed up with Emilia asking her to drive her to different skateparks, and so one day while heading off to work, Natasha took Emilia's skateboard, and placed it in front of the wheel of her car.
Emilia heard a strange sound from her bedroom, looking out the window to see her mother pulling out of the driveway.
Emilia's heart sank as she saw her skateboard, her precious skateboard, lying broken upon the driveway, completely snapped in half.
She ran outside, but it was far too late. Like the death of her beloved goldfish so many years ago, her skateboard was destroyed, gone forever.
It had been special to her, bought as a gift by the same person who taught her how to use it.
It was the end of an era.
Emilia simply let out a slow sigh, closing her eyes to the world.
'I need to get a job and pay for my own shit.' She paused, opening her eyes again. 'No way she'd let me though.'
Emilia knew then that she had to bide her time. That's all she had to do. One day she knew she would be free to live the life she wanted, and not be overshadowed by this dark cloud, the suffocating presence that was her mother.

Emilia went back inside, and continued with what she had been doing before.
She never mentioned the skateboard to her mother. It was as if the whole thing had never happened. As if the skateboard had never even existed. But no matter what, Emilia would always have the memories, and that was something her mother could never take away from her.

The next man to come into Emilia's life, was an adrenaline junkie, and Emilia found herself taking part in things she never thought she would ever do.
Such as bungee-jumping, rock-climbing, paragliding, surfing, mountain-biking, kayaking.
This new man seemed to be wanting to do his best to make friends with Emilia, and to show himself in a positive light, to get on her good side. Not that it would have mattered if he was on her worst side, because Natasha couldn't care less what her daughter thought of the men she brought through the door.
She liked this new man. He was friendly and adventurous. But little did he know that his relationship with Natasha, was doomed to fail before it even began.
Emilia couldn't help but feel a little bad for him.
But as she had learned to do, she could only make the best of the situation, and so she continued to bungee-jump, rock-climb, paraglide, surf, go mountain-biking and kayaking.
One day he took her cliff-jumping. It was a spot famous for it, and he assured her that it was completely safe. He told her, that people jump off this cliff all the time, and the pool below was deep, very deep, and that there had never been an accident, ever.
She trusted him. And so she jumped, after watching him jump a few times. She did it, it was scary, but exciting, and she loved it.
Just before their final jump before heading home, the man looked to a set of buildings some distance away, that could be seen from the high cliffs from where they stood.
'That over there is a school, a girl's school' he told her. 'If I had a of my own daughter, I would want her to go to that school.'
But Emilia was hardly listening, she was already ready to jump again.
'After me!'
And so, she jumped.

Once this latest man was out of her life, Emilia continued to come to this place alone, and then she came with friends, sometimes at night. It was scarier at night, more mysterious, but no less beautiful.
The view from the cliffs was astounding.

Emilia's fear of the water lessened, and she began to slowly trust people in the water around her.

Months later, Natasha picked up Emilia from her kickboxing practice.
Emilia crawled into the car, choosing to sit in the backseat instead of the passenger seat.
'Really?' Natasha said, staring at Emilia's reflection in the rear-view mirror. 'You're making me feel like a taxi.'
'You couldn't possibly be a taxi' Emilia said to the window. 'I'm not paying you to drive me anywhere.'
Natasha just huffed, tutting loudly.

‘Why can’t you choose a better hobby?’ Natasha asked her, pulling out from her parking spot.
‘And what would be a better hobby to you?’ Emilia asked the window, not really caring for an answer.
‘Something a little more girly.’
‘You know I’m not the only girl in my kickboxing class.’
‘And how many girls are there in your class?’ Natasha asked, not really caring for an answer.
‘There’s at least one other girl’ Emilia said.
‘Only one?’
‘She’s the best in class,’ Emilia told her mother. ‘I just can’t defeat her. I’ve been doing really well by the way,’ Emilia said, finally tearing her eyes away from the outside world passing by them. ‘I’ve been able to win against everyone else in my class except for her. I’ve even been able to defeat the boys.’ She looked towards her mother, but she didn’t seem to be listening.
Emilia looked back to the window quietly.
After a few more moments of silence, Natasha spoke again.
‘I still don’t know why you can’t do something else.’
‘Are you ashamed of me?’ Emilia asked her mother.
‘I just think it would look better if you did something like ice-skating, or singing, or becoming a ballerina.’
‘I don’t have any interest in singing, its not my forte. There are no ice-skating rinks anywhere near here, and I don’t want to injure my toes by becoming a ballerina.’
‘Why don’t you be a dancer then?’ Natasha asked her with exasperation.
‘There aren’t any dancing clubs near here.’
‘Then why don’t you start your own?’ Natasha said.
‘And who would drive me there?’
‘You know I’m busy’ Natasha said angrily back.
‘That’s exactly my point’ Emilia said flatly.
‘You have an answer for everything don’t you’ Natasha told her rhetorically.
Emilia chose not to engage, instead continuing to stare out the window.
‘You see’ Natasha began, breaking the silence, ‘this is why I can’t talk to you.’
‘I don’t have to have a *girly* hobby you know’ Emilia told her mother sullenly. ‘Noah does just fine kickboxing.’
‘Who is Noah?’
‘She’s the one I mentioned before. The girl in my kickboxing class.’
‘Her name is Noah?’ Natasha scoffed. ‘Who names their daughter *Noah*?’
‘That’s just her nickname Natasha,’ Emilia told her mother flatly.
‘Why does she have a boy’s nickname?’
‘Anyone can have any nickname they want’ Emilia answered in a monotone, ‘but if you *are* actually interested, it’s because she’s also a magician. She can part water like Noah. I saw her do it, with my own eyes, it was amazing, and for the life of me I can’t figure out…’
‘Is she that big-girl I saw earlier?’ Natasha interrupted.
Emilia just huffed, resting her chin on her palm and staring out the window again.
‘I don’t know Natasha’ Emilia droned.
‘Why can’t I have a lady-like daughter?’ Natasha lamented to herself. ‘All my friends have such pretty and cute daughters. And I end up with a lanky stork.’
‘I don’t know’ Emilia said sarcastically. ‘Maybe I got it from my father.’
‘Don’t you dare’ Natasha said, her tone threatening, her voice hushed.
Emilia glanced towards her mother, seeing her eyes in the rear-view mirror looking back at her.
Emilia simply turned away again, saying nothing.

It was a few weeks after this, that the accident happened.
Natasha wasn't acting entirely like herself, and Emilia felt a little uneasy at getting in the car with her. But what choice did she have? She couldn't walk home in the dark for miles across town and country. And there was no way Emilia could have known what would happen.
She did get a bad feeling, but pushed these feelings aside for the sake of convenience.
Natasha wasn't paying close enough attention to the road, and ended up colliding with another car.
Emilia remembered next to nothing of the accident itself.
Like the gut feeling that something was about to go wrong, her mind erased the worst of the experience, the pain and shock and trauma.

Emilia woke in a hospital bed, having drifted in and out of consciousness before reaching safety, aware only of muffled voices and flashing lights, which she thought later was likely the ambulance.
Now Emilia was fully awake, and her mind slowly began to process how she got here.
A nurse was by her side, and Emilia turned towards her, seeing her friendly face, her calming tone.
Emilia's eye watered. She felt a tear roll down her cheek.
The nurse continued to speak kindly to her, touching her shoulder in a comforting gesture.
Moments later, Emilia learned that she had been involved in an accident. A car crash.
Emilia learned that her leg had been amputated, as it was broken beyond repair.

She never asked about the other car involved in the accident, afraid for what she might hear. She did learn that her mother was alive. But Natasha had not come to visit her. Emilia did not know if she was hurt in any way, like Emilia had been. Perhaps she was in another hospital bed within this hospital. Or in another hospital entirely. When one of the nurses did try to tell Emilia about her mother, perhaps to tell her about her wellbeing and whereabouts, Emilia only interrupted, saying she didn't want to know.

Of course, Emilia assumed there was some sort of investigation to find out who was at fault, and Emilia learned later from a second-hand source, that her mother had been taking drugs that night.
'Oh.' Emilia said to herself. And she said no more.

When Natasha did finally visit her daughter, Emilia saw that she was perfectly well.
She seemed to suffer no serious injury, she could walk, and had no bruising that Emilia could see.
Natasha sat awkwardly in the chair beside Emilia's bed, resting her handbag on her lap.
'Hey' she said shortly.
Emilia turned her head towards mother, responding generically.

‘God that looks ugly,’ Natasha said, seeing the temporary false leg Emilia had been given. ‘I hope they’ve got a better one for when you leave. You can’t be seen wearing *that*.’
Emilia only sighed, closing her eyes.
She didn’t have the energy to speak with her mother, in fact, she didn’t want to see her at all.
Emilia was thoroughly exhausted, both mentally and physically. Having lost her leg was a big shock to her, as was learning to walk again.
She didn’t want to waste her voice on Natasha, and luckily her mother didn’t stay long.
Natasha left only a few minutes later, staying no longer than five.
And that was the last time Emilia ever saw her, for she learned later that her mother was dead.
Died from an overdose, supposedly an accident.
Emilia thought that she had just been careless. Likely she hadn’t meant for it to happen. She knew her mother didn’t want to die.

When the time finally came, Emilia left the hospital alone, walking through the doors. Her false leg attached.
‘I’m not going to let this bring me down’ Emilia told herself, eyes wide and soul burning with determination.
She raised her head.
‘Every day is a golden opportunity’ Emilia said, ‘to better yourself, and to better the life of those around you. If I’ve learned anything…its patience, it’s never to be hateful, and it’s the knowledge that things can always get better…’
Emilia raised her head, looking towards the skies.
Dear mother in hell. Today is my first day, the first day of the rest of my life…and I will live it to the fullest…

THE END